Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOLS
Year Four Report

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Introduction

This document is a report of the Idaho charter schools program conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), under contract with the Idaho State Department of Education. It is the fourth annual report in a five-year study of the program; the final report will be completed in 2004 to coincide with the five-year term limit of Idaho's charter legislation, at which time it will be considered for renewal. This report contains comprehensive school profiles; case studies of the newest schools and a revisiting of a school that has changed greatly since opening four years ago; and surveys administered to teachers, students, and parents of each charter school. The report also compares data among schools and discusses technical assistance needs.

Charter Schools in Idaho

Idaho is the 31st state in the country to pass a charter school law, which it did in 1998. The majority of Idaho charters started the year the law was enacted (1999). This year has seen the largest growth since then, with three new charters coming on the scene. Of the 14 schools that have opened, only one has ceased to operate; Lost Rivers Charter School (Butte County School District) closed its doors in 2000.

This report includes the 13 currently operating charter schools. Most of the schools are very close to large population centers (see Figure 1). Idaho's 13 charter schools are currently serving 3,100 students, an increase of 210 percent since last year. Total school enrollment in all public schools increased by 2,206 in the 2002-2003 school year. The majority of this increase (1,580) was in charter schools, primarily the Idaho Virtual Academy. Nationally, there are approximately 2,700 charter schools in operation; these schools serve approximately 684,000[1] students.

The schools included in this report (and their locations and year of start-up) are:
1. Anser Charter School (Boise, 1999)
2. Blackfoot Community Charter School (Blackfoot, 2000)
3. Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy (Coeur d'Alene, 1999)
4. Hidden Springs Charter Schools (Hidden Springs/Boise, 2001)
5. Idaho Leadership Academy (Pingree; serves students in 12 districts in eastern Idaho; 2002)
6. Idaho Virtual Academy (business office: Arco; serves students statewide; 2002)
7. Idaho Virtual High School (business office: Mountain Home; serves students statewide; 2002)
8. Liberty Charter School (formerly known as Nampa Charter School; Nampa; 1999)
9. Meridian Charter School (Meridian, 1999)
10. Moscow Charter School (Moscow, 1998)

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[1] *The National Charter School Directory 2002–2003*, Center for Education Reform (CER)

11. Pocatello Community Charter School (Pocatello, 1999)
12. Renaissance Charter School (Moscow, 1999)
13. Sandpoint Charter School (Sandpoint, 2001)

Figure 1. Location of Charter Schools Within Idaho
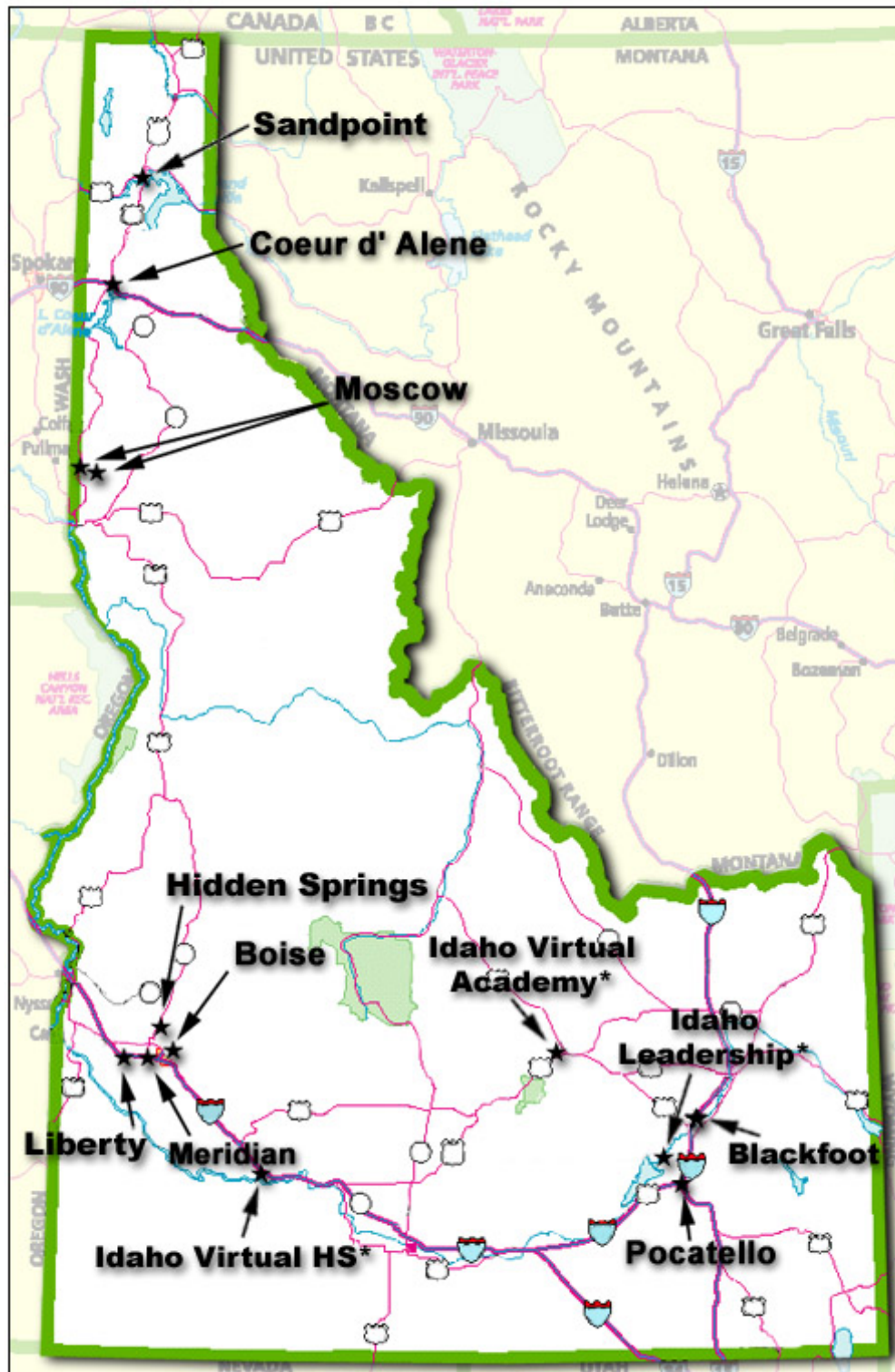
*Site of main office

The Research Model

Guiding Questions and Philosophy

With 13 charter schools in operation, the U.S. Department of Education Charter School Grant continues to have an impact in Idaho. Charter schools in Idaho offer unique learning opportunities and expanded educational choices to 3,100 students. They also offer opportunities for educators to play new roles and test new forms of school governance. The ultimate success of charter schools in Idaho is, and will be, reflected in their ability to make progress toward the educational mission and goals by which they have agreed to be held accountable, as well as their impact on public education reform. This research is an important part of assessing the accountability and impact of charter schools in Idaho.

NWREL used three questions[2] to guide the collection, analysis, and reporting of data for this report:

1. Did the charter schools accomplish what they proposed, based on their mission and goals?
2. Did their students meet the achievement levels proposed in their charter school applications?
3. What makes charter schools in Idaho unique?

This research is guided by the notion that program study is a process done *with* rather than *to* the stakeholders of a charter school. For this reason, administrators, teachers, parents, and students from each school have been included in the process, and the staff of the Idaho State Department of Education was, and will continue to be, involved in reviewing draft instruments throughout its course.

Methodology

The research includes three principal data sources: individual school profiles, surveys, and site visits. In Year One of this study, profiles were created for each of the original eight charter schools based on a review of existing data (charter applications, grant applications, annual reports) and input from schools. During Years Two, Three, and Four, each school was asked to update—or in the case of the newest schools, complete—its profile. The completed school profiles can be found in the School Profile section (see Appendix A). The instructions that were sent with the profiles are included there as well.

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[2] These questions came from the Massachusetts and Colorado State Charter School Program Evaluation Reports.

Second, surveys were designed to complement the existing data. Three separate surveys were developed to address the research questions, one for each group of major stakeholders: parents, students (fourth-graders or above), and staff (teachers, administrators, and any other staff coming into frequent contact with students).

All three surveys assessed satisfaction with the school and reasons for either having children attend, or working at, the school. All three surveys also listed a variety of statements about the schools with which respondents rated their level of agreement. The parent and teacher/administrator surveys measured the perceived success of the schools in addressing their mission and goals and the teacher/administrator survey assessed technical assistance needs. The surveys have remained very consistent from year to year, with only minor modifications made to address issues that surfaced during the course of the project. Copies of the surveys can be found in Appendices B through D. The mission and performance goals for each school were included with the surveys so that respondents could address questions relating to their respective school's mission and performance goals.

Parent surveys were sent to each school for distribution along with instructions and self-addressed stamped envelopes so that they could be returned confidentially. Student and staff surveys were posted on the Internet; passwords were required for entry to the surveys. Students and staff in all schools took surveys online this year. A 100 percent participation rate was requested from all three groups. Return rates and responses are discussed beginning on Page 20.

A site visit was conducted at Idaho Leadership Academy. Meetings were held with the administration at Idaho Virtual Academy and Idaho Virtual High School in lieu of following site visit protocol because of the virtual nature of those two schools. The other 10 schools had been visited in the last three years (site visit reports of all other schools are included in previous years' reports). The visits are included to add depth to the picture of the charter schools in Idaho, and to provide a better understanding of the process occurring at the school, the attainment of proposed goals, and positive outcomes as well as specific challenges experienced by the school. The site visits reflected each school's unique program and environment.

Characteristics of Idaho Charter Schools

Overview

The individual school profiles include data separated into five categories: General Descriptions of the school and its students, Educational Program and Assessment, Performance Goals, Governance, and Financial Data and Other Outcomes. General characteristics of the schools, based on their self-reported data, are summarized below. Data for each school can be found in Appendix A. Most of the schools provided complete and updated profiles. Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare Idaho charters to charters on a national level because of lack of consistent national data.

Enrollment

Charter school enrollment in Idaho has more than tripled since the first year of this study. The 13 currently operational charter schools are serving 3,100 students, or 1 percent of Idaho's public school students[3]. An estimated 641 students (21 percent of total enrollment) coming into the charter schools this year were previously home schooled. The number of students on waiting lists is 83 percent of the total number already enrolled; 2,578 students are trying to enroll in the 13 existing charter schools. One school, Liberty Charter School, accounts for 1,500 of the applications. Table 1 displays these figures by school.

The average enrollment of Idaho charter schools is 238, and the median enrollment is 140. About 8 percent of students left their charter schools this year; nearly all students who left (99 percent of them) did so to transfer to other schools.

All but two of the schools enroll students who are children of school organizers. The average percentage of children of organizers in those schools is 6 percent, with a range of 0.1 to 18 percent of total enrollment.

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[3] Total state enrollment in Idaho's public schools in 2002–2003 was 248,515 (257,169 including non-public schools and the Idaho School for the Deaf and Blind).

Table 1. Enrollment, Students Leaving Mid-year and Number of Students on Waiting Lists

School	Enrollment	Students Leaving (Percentage of total)	Number on Waiting List (As percentage of enrollment)
Anser	138	1 (1%)	280 (203%)
Blackfoot	59	3 (5%)	54 (92%)
Coeur d'Alene	320	51 (16%)	51 (16%)
Hidden Springs	319	4 (1%)	369 (116%)
Idaho Leadership Academy	140	16 (11%)	62 (44%)
Idaho Virtual Academy	1004	115 (11%)	11 (1%)
Idaho Virtual High School	130	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Liberty	336	11 (3%)	1,500 (446%)
Meridian	180	8 (4%)	30 (17%)
Moscow	108	12 (11%)	0 (0%)
Pocatello	182	14 (8%)	200 (110%)
Renaissance	94	2 (2%)	13 (14%)
Sandpoint	90	2 (2%)	8 (9%)
Total	**3,100**	**239 (8%)**	**2,578 (83%)**

Grade Levels/Student Organization

The charter schools serve a variety of grade level configurations (see Table 2). Six schools serve elementary students, four schools serve students in the middle grades, and five schools serve high school–aged students. Six of the schools have children in multi-grade classrooms. Of the 10 schools that have been operational for more than one year, eight have expanded the number of grade levels served. The schools tend to grow slowly, adding one grade level per year. Meridian Charter High School has been adding one high school level since it opened its doors, and this year is operating a full ninth-12th-grade high school. Liberty Charter School added the high school through grades 11, and is now serving those eighth-graders that started at the school its first year of operation.

Table 2. Number of Schools Serving Various Grade Level Combinations

Grades served	K-5 or K-6	K-8	7-8	K-11 Or K- 12	6-12 Or 7-12	9-12
Number of schools	4	2	1	2	2	2

Student Characteristics

Table 3 summarizes the number of schools whose student characteristics differ notably from their districts within each characteristic. Tables 4 and 5 show the student demographic data for the charter schools and their respective districts[4] across six types of characteristics. Overall, 69 percent of the comparisons between the two groups showed that charter schools had a reasonably similar percentage[5] of students with a given characteristic.

Table 3. Number of Charter Schools Whose Student Characteristics Differ[3] from their Districts'

Racial/Ethnic	Free/Reduced Lunch	Special Education	Gifted & Talented	LEP	Title I
4	7	3	1	3	6

Table 4 shows the racial and ethnic characteristics of students. Four (4) of the 13 schools have notably fewer minority students than their sponsoring districts. This is similar to demographic differences in prior years of this study.

Table 5 shows percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, and students identified as special education, gifted and talented, limited English proficient (LEP), and Title I. Seven charter schools had a notably smaller number of students that are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; three schools had had more eligible students than their districts. Special education and LEP differences occur between three schools and their districts. Six schools had notably fewer Title I students than their districts. Only one school had a notable difference in the number of gifted and talented students. Several of the schools noted that particular characteristics were "not applicable." Many charter schools have not collected this information as a part of registration. Documentation or verification of the information given in the self-reports was not a part of this review. Previously home-schooled students, in particular, may never have been tested for special needs.

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[4] For the purposes of this comparison, the two virtual schools are compared with their sponsoring districts; however, because they draw on students around the state, those figures are also provided. While Idaho Leadership Academy draws on students from 15 districts as part of its distance-learning program, it is also compared to its sponsoring district.

[5] A difference of less than or equal to 10 percent is the nationally accepted threshold for charter schools to be aligned with district percentages of minority student and students with special needs designations.

Table 4. Student Racial/Ethnic Characteristics by Charter Schools and Their Districts* (percentages)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Native American	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Multi-Racial	Declined to state	TOTAL MINORITY
Blackfoot Charter	94%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	0%	6%
Blackfoot District	70%	0%	16%	12%	1%	0%	0%	30%
Anser Charter	92%	0%	4%	0%	3%	1%	0%	8%
Hidden Springs Charter	93%	0%	2%	1%	0%	3%	0%	7%
Boise Indep. District	89%	2%	6%	1%	3%	0%	0%	11%
Coeur d'Alene Charter	96%	0%	2%	0%	2%	0%	0%	3%
Coeur d'Alene District	95%	1%	2%	0%	1%	0%	0%	5%
Meridian Charter	95%	2%	1%	0%	2%	0%	0%	5%
Meridian Joint District	93%	1%	4%	0%	2%	0%	0%	7%
Moscow Charter	90%	2%	5%	1%	2%	0%	0%	10%
Renaissance Charter	92%	3%	2%	0%	3%	0%	0%	8%
Moscow District	92%	2%	2%	1%	3%	0%	0%	8%
Liberty Charter	91%	0%	5%	2%	2%	0%	0%	9%
Nampa District	73%	1%	25%	0%	1%	0%	0%	27%
Pocatello Charter	92%	0%	5%	0%	3%	0%	0%	8%
Pocatello District	86%	1%	6%	5%	2%	0%	0%	14%
Sandpoint Charter	97%	0%	1%	0%	2%	0%	0%	3%
Pend Oreille School Dis.	96%	0%	2%	1%	1%	0%	0%	4%
Idaho Leadership Academy	95%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%
Snake River District	82%	0%	17%	1%	1%	0%	0%	18%

	White	Black	Hispanic	Native American	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Multi- Racial	Declined to state	TOTAL MINORITY
Idaho Virtual Academy	89%	0%	1%	1%	1%	4%	3%	8%
Idaho Virtual High School	96%	1%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%
STATE OF IDAHO	85%	16%	12%	12%	1%	0%	0%	40%
Butte County District	93%	1%	4%	1%	0%	0%	0%	7%
Mountain Home District	80%	4%	12%	0%	3%	0%	0%	20%

SOURCE: Charter schools reported their own students' demographic information. District data was received from Idaho State Department of Education's statistics, with the exception of Title I data that were provided by the State Office of Student Achievement and School Accountability (*2001–2002 school year was the latest available).

NOTE: There may be some rounding error when adding across.

**Table 5.** Student Characteristics by Charter Schools and Their Districts* (percentages)

	Free/Reduced -Price Lunch	Special Education	Gifted &Talented	Limited English Proficient	Title I
Blackfoot Charter	66%	8%	1%	0%	31%
Blackfoot District	48%	12%	3%	22%	39%
Anser Charter	8%	15%	9%	2%	0%
Hidden Springs Charter	NA	4%	1%	2%	NA
Boise Indep. District	29%	11%	2%	4%	23%
Coeur d'Alene Charter	NA	0.6%	0%	0%	0%
Coeur d'Alene District	34%	10%	14%	0%	8%
Meridian Charter	10%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Meridian Joint District	16%	11%	8%	2%	2%
Moscow Charter	40%	10%	3%	0%	7%
Renaissance Charter	45%	14%	0%	0%	9%
Moscow District	21%	11%	9%	1%	2%
Liberty Charter	29%	5%	0%	0%	NA
Nampa District	42%	12%	3%	18%	14%
Pocatello Charter	39%	16%	2%	0%	0%
Pocatello District	37%	13%	4%	1%	2%
Sandpoint Charter	0%	13%	0%	0%	0%
Pend Oreille School Dis.	40%	12%	2%	0%	13%
Idaho Leadership Academy	16%	4%	4%	1%	0%
Snake River District	36%	11%	7%	13%	9%
Idaho Virtual Academy	42%	6%	4%	0%	27%
Idaho Virtual High School	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
STATE OF IDAHO	38%	12%	5%	8%	20%
Butte County District	45%	13%	3%	0%	91%
Mountain Home District	35%	17%	2%	7%	12%

SOURCE: Charter schools reported their own students' demographic information. District data were received from the Idaho State Department of Education's statistics web pages, with the exception of Title I data that were provided by the State Office of Student Achievement and School Accountability (*2001–2002 school year was the latest available).

Student-to-Teacher Ratios

The average student-to-teacher ratio of non-virtual charter schools is 19-to-1, while district averages are 17-to-1. Figure 2 shows a comparison between the schools and their districts. The two virtual schools have a very high number of students per teacher. However, no comparison is made between the virtual schools and their districts because their teaching arrangements differ greatly.   Virtual schoolteachers do not work with students in the conventional sense- i.e. a classroom where a group of students are receiving instruction simultaneously. Their work compares more accurately to a consultant-teacher who checks in with the person providing the instruction (parent or mentor) on a regular basis. For example, the Idaho Leadership Academy has a high student to teacher ratio because a teacher oversees several mentors who work with students in smaller groups.[6]

Figure 2.

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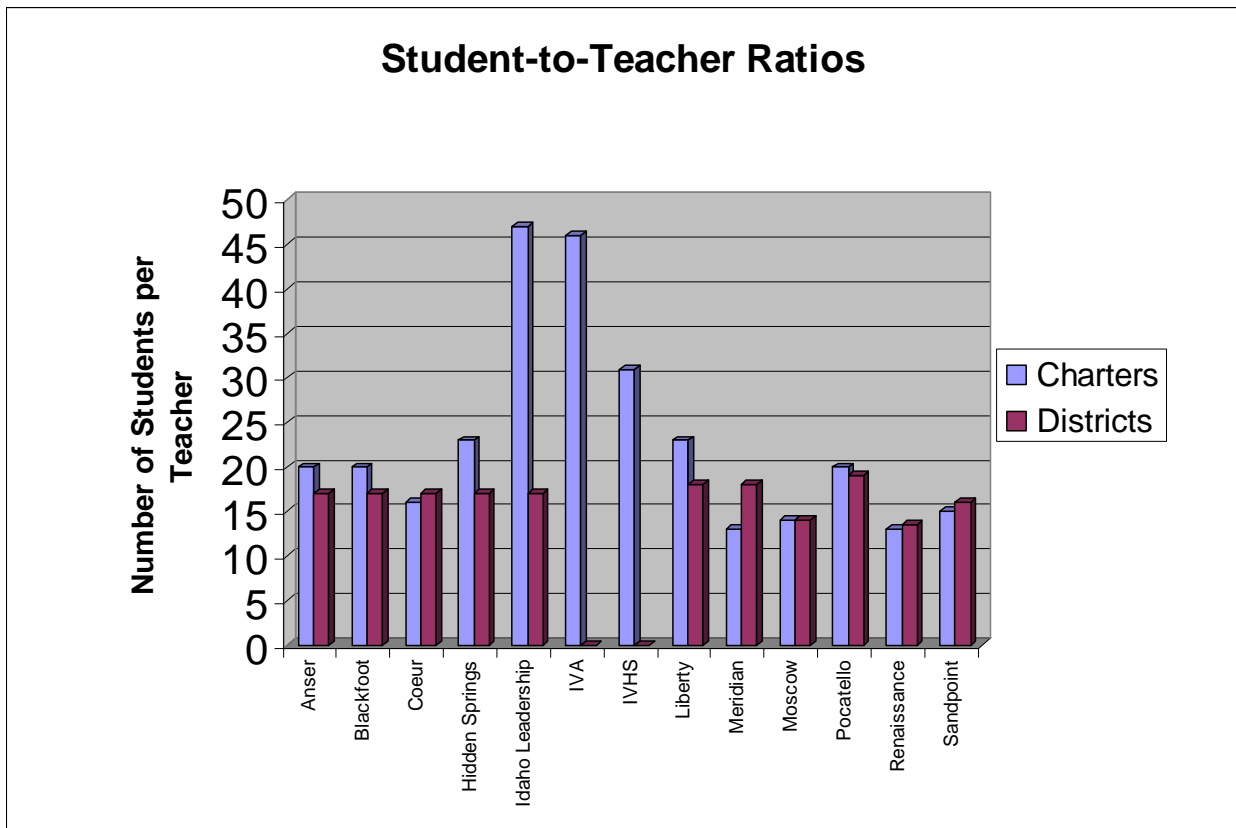
[6] Small-group mentors have bachelors or master's degrees, though they are not certified teachers. They teach under the supervision of a certified teacher, who is also the academic director of the school. The teacher lays out the curriculum and makes sure it is aligned with Idaho state standards. In addition to working with a group, each mentor works one-on-one with each student to review accomplishments and set goals on an individualized basis. After each such session, reports are provided to the lead teacher.

Educational Program

Idaho charter schools offer a number of educational programs or approaches (see Table 6). At least half the schools offered the following approaches:

- Hands-on learning (85 percent offered this)
- Character instruction (77 percent)
- Thematic/interdisciplinary instruction (77 percent)
- Project-based learning (62 percent)
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- Foreign language at all grades (62 percent)
- Block scheduling (54 percent)

Charter High Schools

Four of the five high schools have students dually enrolled in other schools. Coeur d'Alene, Idaho Leadership, Meridian, and Renaissance Charter Schools have students taking courses for both academic and enrichment reasons, at both district schools and local colleges. The Idaho Virtual High School differs slightly from the other four schools offering dual enrollment. It offers conventional public school students the opportunity to supplement their courses with its online courses. Students are required to pay additional fees for courses that extend their load beyond full-time enrollment (per Idaho law). One of the schools offers Advanced Placement (AP) courses, three offer students the opportunity to take college entrance exams, and one offers professional/ technical education opportunities. At the time of data collection, only one charter high school reported its graduation rate, which was 100 percent.

Table 6. Educational Programs Used

	Total % Using	Anser	Blackfoot	Coeur d'Alene	Hidden Springs	Idaho Leadership Academy	Idaho Virtual Academy	Idaho Virtual High School	Liberty	Meridian	Moscow	Pocatello	Renaissance	Sandpoint
Block Scheduling	54%	X				X		X	X	X	X			X
Character Instruction	77%	X	X		X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge	23%				X		X		X					
Extended Year/Day	31%	X	X	X										X
Foreign Language At All Grades	62%	X		X	X	X			X	X	X		X	
Hands-On	85%	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound	23%	X									X	X		
Multiage/Grade	46%	X	X			X					X	X	X	
Multiple Intelligences	46%				X				X		X	X	X	X
Service Learning	46%	X			X	X			X			X	X	
Technology as Major Focus	46%	X			X				X	X	X	X		
Thematic/Interdisciplinary	77%	X	X		X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
Year-Round	8%								X					
Project Based	62%	X	X			X			X	X		X	X	X
Concept Based	8%									X				
Mentoring	8%					X								
Great Books	8%					X								
Art/Chorus/Suzuki Strings	8%												X	

Performance Assessments

Idaho charter schools assess student performance both through criterion- and norm-referenced tests, as well as through other performance assessments. Table 7 shows which schools are using which assessments; the number using required tests[7] varies depending on grade levels served (see Appendix E for information about grade levels assessed by each test). Idaho requires all schools to use certain tests. They include the ISAT, IRI, DMA, and DWA if they serve students required to take those tests. The charter schools reported the following percentages of use of these tests: ISAT- 85%, DMA- 69%, and IRI- 62%. Not all schools serve the grade levels that are targeted by a particular test, but those marked with NR (no response) on Tables 10 and 11 did not provide data from the required tests even though their numbers would have allowed them to do so without compromising student confidentiality. The lack of ability to compare the scores of students in the charter schools with students who match them in regular schools, makes meaningful score comparisons impossible. Data from each school are shown at the end of their respective profiles.

Direct Math Assessment

Two of seven applicable schools reported their 8th grade DMA math scores. While neither of these schools met state proficiency levels of 3.0 or above, both exceeded state averages. Six of eight applicable schools reported their 4th grade DMA scores. Four of these schools exceeded state averages, and three exceeded state proficiency levels. Table 8 shows the average DMA scores for fourth- and eighth-graders.

Idaho Reading Indicator

Four schools of eight schools serving Kindergarten through third grade reported their IRI results. In order to show a more accurate picture of results, scores were obtained from the Idaho State Department of Education. Table 9 shows the percentage of Kindergartners and first- through third-graders scoring at, near, or below proficiency levels for all schools.

Idaho Standards Achievement Test

Seven schools out of thirteen reported their ISAT results for mathematics, reading, and language arts. See Tables 10 through 12 for results by school.

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[7] In a change from prior years, Idaho is no longer requiring the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA), and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) nor is it using the Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP). Required tests now include the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI), the Direct Mathematics Assessment (DMA) and Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT).

Table 7. Performance Assessments Used

	Total % Using	Anser	Blackfoot	Coeur d'Alene	Hidden Springs	Idaho Leadership Academy	Idaho Virtual Academy	Idaho Virtual High School	Liberty	Meridian	Moscow	Pocatello	Renaissance	Sandpoint
CRITERION-REFERENCED TESTS And NORM-REFERENCED TESTS														
Idaho Reading Indicator*	62%	X	X		X		X		X		X	X	X	
Direct Mathematics Assessment*	69%	X	X		X		X		X		X	X	X	X
Nat'l Assessment of Education Progress	31%		X	X								X	X	
Idaho Standards Ach. Test* (ISAT)	85%	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
ACT/COMPASS/PLAN	23%								X	X			X	
District/School Criterion Ref'd	23%			X					X				X	
Other norm referenced	23%				X				X	X				
PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS														
Portfolios	62%	X				X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Individual Character Plans	8%	X												
TerraNova Criterion-Ref'd Performance Assessments	8%			X										
School Developed Assessments	77%	X	X		X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X

Currently required by the state for various grade levels. See Appendix E for testing requirements.

Assessment/Grade	State Average	ANSER	Blackfoot	Coeur d'Alene	Hidden Springs	Idaho Leadership	Idaho Virtual Academy	Idaho Virtual High School	Liberty	Meridian	Moscow	Pocatello	Renaissance	Sandpoint
DMA 8	2.2	--	--	NR	2.7	NR	--	--	2.4	--	--	NR	NR	NR
DMA 4	2.7	3.1	1.4	--	3.4	--	2.5	--	3.3	--	2.8	NR	NR	--

NR = Not Reported

Table 9. Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) Scores (Winter 2003)

	K N=	%	At N=	%	Near N=	%	Below N=	1st N=	%	At N=	%	Near N=	%	Below N=	2nd N=	%	At N=	%	Near N=	%	Below N=	3rd N=	%	At N=	%	Near N=	%	Below N=
Anser	17	82	14	18	3	0	0	17	88	15	12	2	0	0	19	89	17	0	0	11	2	20	80	16	0	0	20	4
Blackfoot	7	*	*	*	*	*	*	11	73	8	9	1	18	2	11	36	4	27	3	36	4	12	25	3	17	2	58	7
Hidden Springs	50	100	50	0	0	0	0	50	100	50	0	0	0	0	50	86	43	12	6	2	1	28	96	27	4	1	0	0
Idaho Virtual Academy	135	55	74	30	41	15	20	142	73	104	23	33	4	5	135	57	77	23	31	20	27	119	56	67	18	22	25	30
Liberty	24	58	14	25	6	17	4	28	96	27	4	1	0	0	28	93	26	7	2	0	0	28	93	26	4	1	4	1
Moscow	17	82	14	18	3	0	0	23	78	18	22	5	0	0	12	75	9	17	2	8	1	14	57	8	7	1	36	5
Pocatello	21	81	17	19	4	0	0	21	67	14	24	5	10	2	20	55	11	15	3	30	6	20	70	14	5	1	25	5
Renaissance	14	57	8	36	5	7	1	9	*	*	*	*	*	*	9	*	*	*	*	*	*	2	*	*	*	*	*	*
State Average	K	54% At Grade Level		29% Near Grade Level		16% Below Grade Level		1st	76% At Grade Level		19% Near Grade Level		4% Below Grade Level		2nd	63% At Grade Level		23% Below Grade Level		14% Near Grade Level		3rd	62% At Grade Level		18% Near Grade Level		20% Below Grade Level	

Table 10.
Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) Mathematics Averages (2002–2003)

Grade Level	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Anser	195	207	220	223	230	--	--	--
Blackfoot	173	182	190	212	--	--	--	--
Coeur d'Alene	--	--	--	--	NR	NR	NR	NR
Hidden Springs	204.8	223.6	224.8	234.6	240.4	245.1	240.2	--
Idaho Leadership	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	231.1
Idaho Virtual Academy	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Idaho Virtual High School	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	NR
Liberty	191.3	206.9	213.9	236.3	229.7	236.1	236.9	250.0
Meridian	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	248.6
Moscow	205.4	213.6	221.1	226.3	230.1	--	--	--
Pocatello	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	--
Renaissance	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Sandpoint	--	--	--	--	--	226.8	235.4	--
State Average	*Not yet available*							
State Proficiency Level	*185*	*196*	*205*	*213*	*219*	*225*	*233*	*240*

NR = Not Reported

Table 11.
Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) Reading Averages (2002–2003)

Grade Level	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Anser	197	209	222	221	226	--	--	--
Blackfoot	172	187	186	203	--	--	--	--
Coeur d'Alene	--	--	--	--	NR	NR	NR	NR
Hidden Springs	194.9	208.9	212.5	221	222.2	225.1	232.5	--
Idaho Leadership	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	227.0
Idaho Virtual Academy	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Idaho Virtual High School	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	NR
Liberty	190.9	204.0	204.7	218.4	216.6	223.2	224.1	232.9
Meridian	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	234.6
Moscow	204.5	204.4	213.0	217.0	218.6	--	--	--
Pocatello	176.7	199.9	208.8	204.3	212.1	220.3	223.9	--
Renaissance	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Sandpoint	--	--	--	--	--	220.5	223.2	--
State Average	*Not yet available*							
State Proficiency Level	*182*	*193*	*200*	*206*	*211*	*215*	*218*	*221*

NR = Not Reported

Table 12.
Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) Language Arts Averages (2002–2003)

Grade Level	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Anser	198	210	217	219	224	--	--	--
Blackfoot	177	188	189	203	--	--	--	--
Coeur d'Alene	--	--	--	--	NA	NA	NA	NA
Hidden Springs	199.7	212.4	212.3	221.8	223.7	225.6	230.4	--
Idaho Leadership	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	224.0
Idaho Virtual Academy	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Idaho Virtual High School	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	NR
Liberty	194.9	208.4	209.5	223.4	219.6	226.3	227.1	232.6
Meridian	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	232.6
Moscow	201.0	208.1	213.5	213.3	219.8	--	--	--
Pocatello	182.2	202.8	211.1	211.0	212.	218.7	221.7	--
Renaissance	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Sandpoint	--	--	--	--	--	218.2	221.9	--
State Average	*Not yet available*							
State Proficiency Level	*184*	*194*	*201*	*208*	*212*	*215*	*219*	*221*

NR = Not Reported

Student Services

The type and number of student services offered to charter students varies from school to school. Services include counseling, after-school programs, special education, lunch programs, and transportation. Table 13 shows the number of schools offering counseling, special education, and after-school programs, and where those services occur. All schools offer counseling services, and nine offer an after-school program. One of the schools offered its students counseling services through a city program.

Table 13. Number of Schools Offering a Particular Service or Program

	Total	On Site	Through District	Off Site
Counseling	13	8	3	2
Special Ed	13	11	2	0
After School	9	7	1	1

Lunch Programs

Not all charter schools provide lunch or access to free/reduced price lunch to students. Nine of the eleven non-virtual schools provide lunch for students at least three days per week. Six of those schools participate in the Child Nutrition Program, and seven are part of the Free/Reduced-Price Lunch program. See Table 14 for lunch program information by school (non-virtual schools not included).

Table 14. Participation in Food Programs by School

	Provide Lunch Regularly	Child Nutrition Program	Free-Reduced Lunch Program
Anser	X		
Blackfoot	X	X	X
Coeur			
Hidden	X		
Idaho Leadership	X	X	X
Liberty	X	X	X
Meridian	X	X	X
Moscow	X	X	X
Pocatello	X		X
Renaissance	X	X	X
Sandpoint			
TOTAL	**9**	**6**	**7**

Transportation

While seven of the 11 non-virtual charter schools offer transportation to their students, the majority of charter school students travel to and from school by modes other than school-provided transportation. Figure 3 displays the various modes of transportation used by charter school students. The majority (64 percent) is driven to school. Nearly one-third (29 percent) of students ride a school bus to get to school. When only the schools that offer transportation were examined, average ridership of charter schools jumped to 46 percent. The average ridership for chartering districts is 40 percent, and state ridership for the 2001–2002 school year (latest data available) was 48 percent. Table 15 shows the average ridership (i.e., students who ride a school bus) for each school.

Figure 3. Student Modes of Transportation

Data does not include Idaho Virtual Academy and Idaho Virtual High School, since students participate from home.
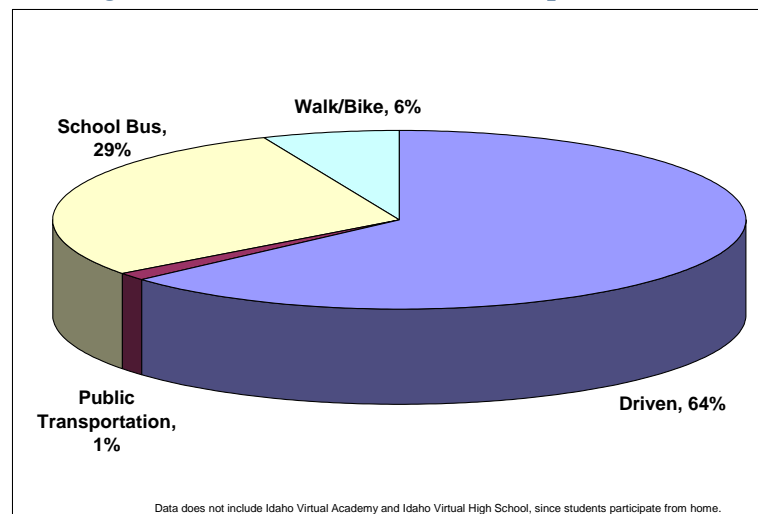
Table 15. Average Ridership for Non-Virtual Charters

	Charter School	District
Anser	--	22%
Blackfoot	98%	62%
Coeur	--	28%
Hidden	--	22%
Idaho Leadership*	48%	59%
Liberty	85%	68%
Meridian	30%	42%
Moscow	10%	36%
Pocatello	--	35%
Renaissance	30%	36%
Sandpoint	23%	33%
AVERAGE	**29%**	**40%**

*District figures are for Idaho Leadership Academy's sponsoring district, not for all districts whose students the school serves.

Facility
Charter schools are housed in a variety of buildings. The facilities range from new buildings designed specifically for the school to temporary leased space in retail locations. A few schools lease buildings that are no longer being used by their districts. Six charter schools have permanent facilities, and seven are in temporary ones. The two virtual schools each have office space, and one has a testing center; the schools are not included in the charter school average. Table 16 shows average facility square footage per student. It does not discriminate differences in square footage that result from the use of temporary facilities.

Table 16. Average Facility Square Footage per Student

	Average	Range
Elementary School Buildings		
National Average	112	77 - 147
Middle School Buildings		
National Average	154	114 – 212
High School Buildings		
National Average	161	123 - 211
Idaho Charter Schools		
Charter School Average[5]	96	34 - 212

SOURCE FOR NATIONAL AVERAGES: The Council of Educational Facility Planners

Calendar

The charter schools serve students an average of 175 days per year; the number of days ranges from 160 to 203. Five of the 13 charter schools follow their district's calendars. One of the charter schools serves students year round, and four are on an extended day or year schedule. Students in the distance education and virtual high schools follow unique schedules. Idaho Leadership Academic follows the district calendar for on-campus students. Distance learning students follow their home district's schedules, making it easier for them to dual enroll. The arrangement also results in groups of students attending school for a differing number of days, depending on each group's home district calendar. Students at the virtual high school may enroll at various starting points in the term; since students' assignments are given a time value, a term may be compressed into 10 weeks rather than 12.

School Goals

Schools report that they are meeting the majority of their goals. The schools' self-reported levels of accomplishment on student performance and organizational goals are shown in Figures 4 and 5, respectively. Some charters reported that some of their goals were not yet met because they related to new programs, or programs from which no data were yet available. See individual school profiles (Appendix A) for each school's goals, methods used to reach the goals, levels, and evidence of accomplishment.

The charter schools have a total of 116 goals, with each school having between 4 and 45 stated goals. Seventy-four (74) of the goals relate to student performance, and schools report having met or exceeded 84 percent of these. Forty-six (46) of the goals are organizational or programmatic, and schools report having met or exceeded 89 percent of these.

Examples of student performance goals include:
- "Our goal is to align with the federal goal that every child will read independently by the end of 3rd grade."
- "Students will meet or exceed district level proficiency on the Idaho Reading Indicator in grades K–3."

- "90% of 10th grade students will pass the ISAT."
- "Students will be able to write narrative and expository pieces using the writing process with 90% accuracy."
- "Students will gain exposure to an appreciation of great works of literature."
- "Students will be able to define a problem, research solutions, and articulate a response."
- "[Our goal is] to build confident, motivated, disciplined, successful learners who will continue learning all their lives."
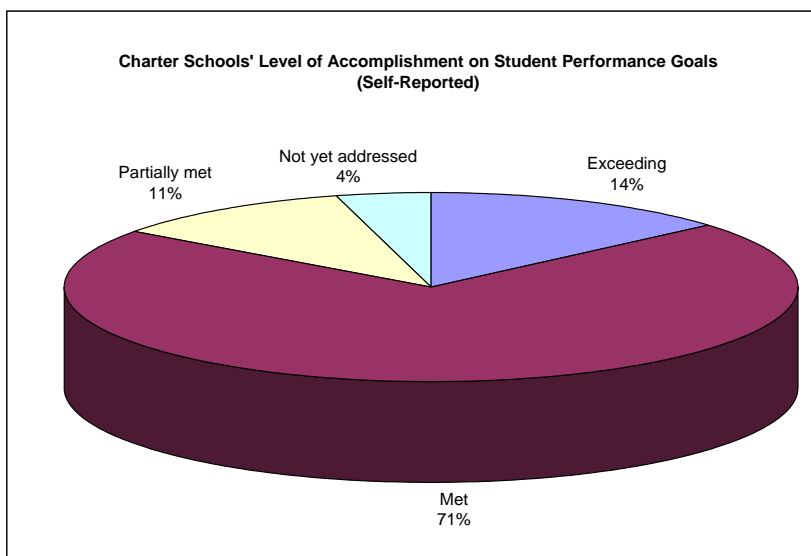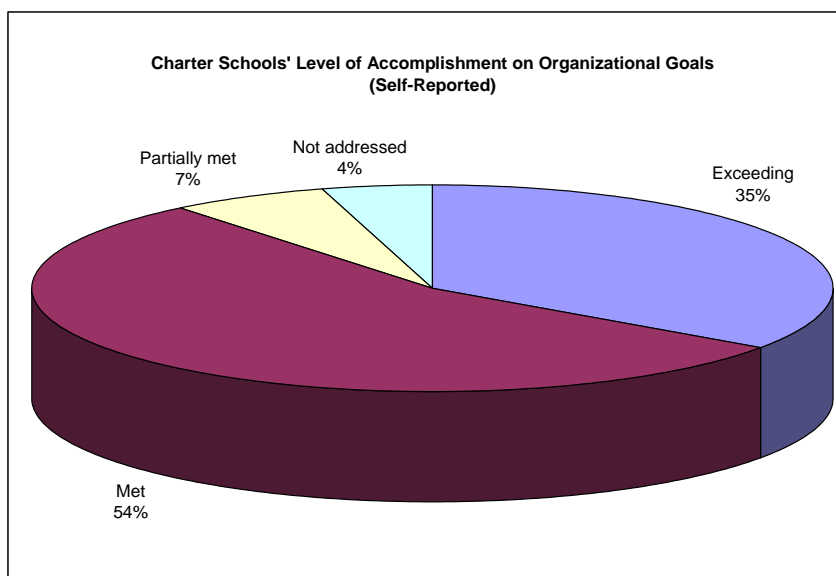
Examples of organizational goals include:
- "The school will develop its own courses."
- "[Our goal is] to increase parental involvement."
- "[Our goal is] to increase the degree of satisfaction among employers of graduates."
- "Our graduates will have the ability to succeed in our capitalist economy and compete internationally."

The evidence and rigor used to support the extent to which goals are reached varies from school to school. Some of the data are rigorous and consistent with goals (e.g., "all scores were at or above the proficient level" supports a goal that related to such scores), while some is less so (e.g., "anecdotal evidence" does not rigorously support student performance). The Idaho Charter School Network is currently facilitating peer review site visits so that the schools may each further examine their own progress toward goals.

Schools have reported meeting goals. Ninety-one percent of all goals are either being met or exceeded in the 10 schools that were operational prior to the 2002–2003 school year. Last year, 69 percent of goals were being met or exceeded in those schools.

Figure 4.

Charter Schools' Level of Accomplishment on Student Performance Goals (Self-Reported)

Partially met 11%

Not yet addressed 4%

Exceeding 14%

Met 71%

Figure 5.

Charter Schools' Level of Accomplishment on Organizational Goals
(Self-Reported)

Amendments & Waivers

Nine of the 13 charter schools have applied for amendments to their original charters. Two of the schools have modified their goals, one to reflect state standards. Other amendments have included streamlining school operations, adding grade levels, offering transportation for students, providing special education services, and establishing student discipline policies. One school has applied for a waiver so that a teacher could teach outside his/her endorsement area.

Staff Characteristics

Several charter schools have more than one administrator. Seven of the schools have two administrators, and one school has three. Eight of the schools have administrators who are certified, while the other five have consultant specialists in those positions. At least three of the charter schools had changes in administration in the past two years. The majority (eight) of the schools have administrators who are full-time in their positions. Three schools have administrators who also teach in the classroom. Charter school administrators have an average of 10 years of experience.

Idaho charter schools employ a total of 172 teachers, 118 of whom are full-time employees. One hundred forty-five, or 84 percent, are certified through traditional teacher certification routes. Eighteen instructors (10 percent) are consultant specialists who are certified for one year through an alternative certification route; 22 are non-certified instructors (13 percent) who teach classes such as music or art. All but one of the schools has a certified special education teacher on staff. Nine teachers are teaching out of the area in which they are certified.

Teachers in the charter schools have an average of eight years of teaching experience. Forty-four teachers, or 26 percent, have their master's degrees; three teachers have a doctoral degree. Nine schools have staff taking graduate-level courses.

This year, seven schools had a total of 10 staff depart during the school year. Reasons for departure included moving out of the area, retirement, and seeking different opportunities.

Governance & Policies

Idaho charter school boards have an average of six members each. The school boards primarily consist of parents (52 percent of all members), followed by community members (42 percent), and staff (6 percent). No students are board members. Figure 6 shows the average percentage of representation. Two schools have board members who are also business partners. The boards generally meet once a month.

Most of the schools create their own policies on admissions, attendance, discipline, and grading. Table 17 shows the number of schools adopting policies from their sponsoring districts.

Figure 6.

Average Representation on Charter School Boards
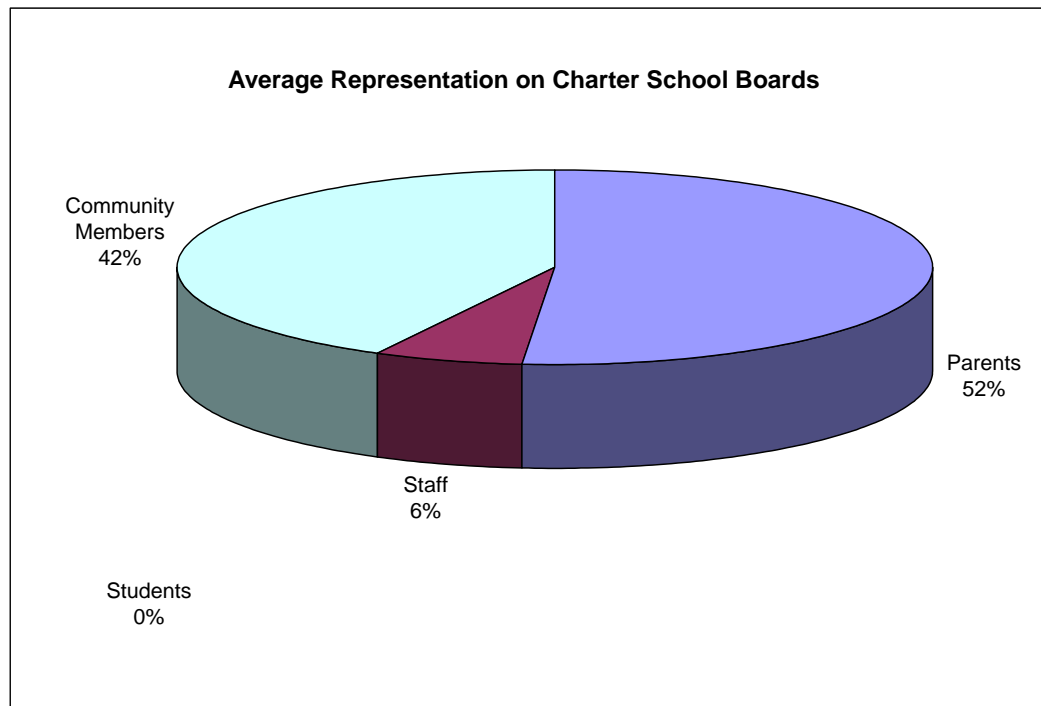
Table 17. Number of Schools That Adopted Policies From Their Sponsoring District

Policy Area	Number of Schools Adopting
Admissions	3
Attendance	3
Discipline	1
Grading	1

Operating Budgets

The operating budgets of Idaho charter schools range from $454,208 to $2.2 million annually. Two schools have budgets of less than $500,000, and seven have annual budgets exceeding one million dollars. Figure 7 illustrates the annual operating budgets relative to enrollment for each school. Staff salaries account for 48 percent of budgets, on average, and range from 37 to 76 percent of the total. Seven schools have debt, with amounts ranging from 600 to 2.7 million dollars.

Figure 7. Annual Operating Budgets and Enrollment

Enrollment figures shown in white.

28
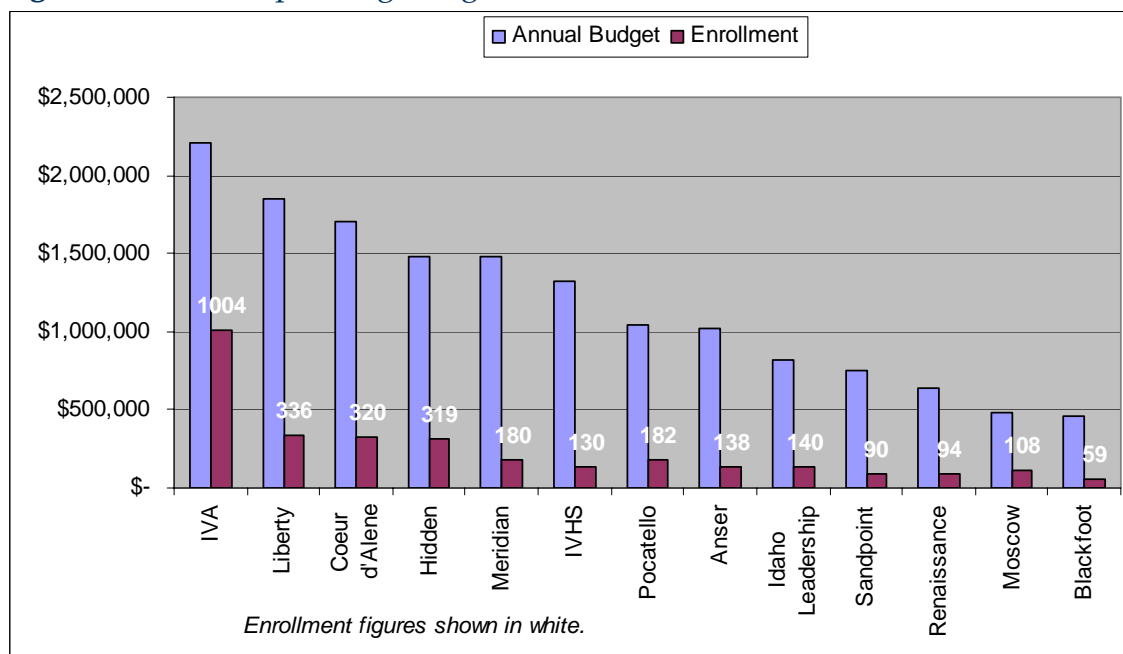
Annual Cost per Student

The average amount spent by charter schools per student per year is $6,092, while the amount spent by chartering districts, on average, is $7,286 per year[8]. Three schools are able to keep costs per student below $4,000 annually, while two schools spend more than $8,000 per year per student. Figure 8 illustrates the differences between charter schools and their district in the average annual cost per student; Table 18 also lists the amounts. Eight of the 11 non-virtual charter schools are able to spend less per student than their districts.

Table 18.

	Annual Budget	Enrollment
IVA	$2,208,800	1,004
Liberty	$1,850,000	336
Coeur d'Alene	$1,700,000	320
Hidden	$1,482,861	319
Meridian	$1,477,982	180
IVHS	$1,323,197	130
Pocatello	$1,041,633	182
Anser	$1,021,251	138
Idaho Leadership	$819,997	140
Sandpoint	$756,151	90
Renaissance	$643,220	94
Moscow	$482,248	108
Blackfoot	$454,208	59

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[8] School figures are calculated using enrollment and operational budget (expenditure figures are not yet available for all schools). District figures are calculated using enrollment and expenditures from 2001–2002. Figures have been adjusted to account for inflation using the 2.17 percent rate recommended by the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Figure 8. Average Annual Cost per Student
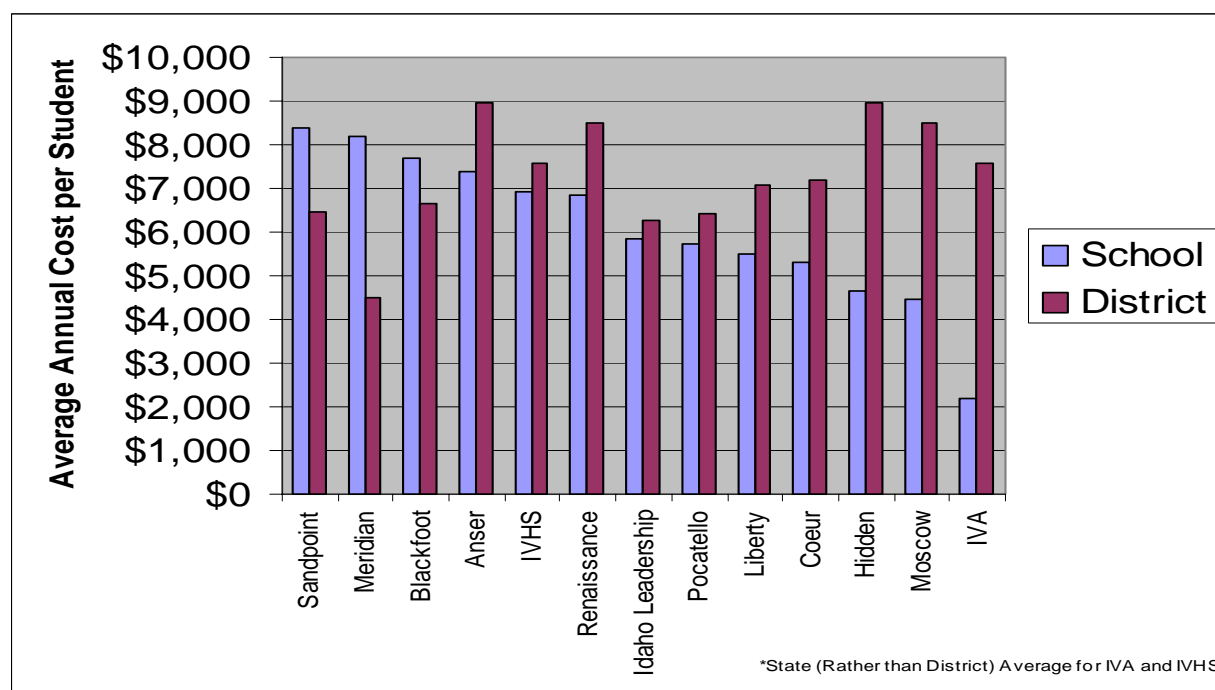
Funding

Idaho's operational charter schools receive funding through several streams, the main one being state/district monies. The amount of state money received is calculated using the average daily attendance (ADA) funding formula used for all public schools/districts in the state. This year, the charters received a total of $15.5 million, 88 percent of which came from the state/districts. Depending on eligibility and method of payment, schools can work collaboratively with the chartering district for efficient use of other funds, receiving their portion as flow-through or as a direct payment. Some of the funding is enhancement money, which is specifically designated to develop programs for technology (nine schools receive this), reading (four), gifted and talented learners (four), and standards implementation (one), among others. Nine schools receive lottery funds. Schools may also receive donations or grants, such as for Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). No charter schools in Idaho receive funding from local tax revenues. Figure 9 illustrates the source and amount of funding received by the charters.

Several of the schools qualify for additional federal funds. Five schools qualify for Title I funds, and 11 qualify for special education. The majority of schools report that they do not participate in district discussions on how to spend the federal dollars.

Figure 9. Types and Sources of Funding Received by Schools
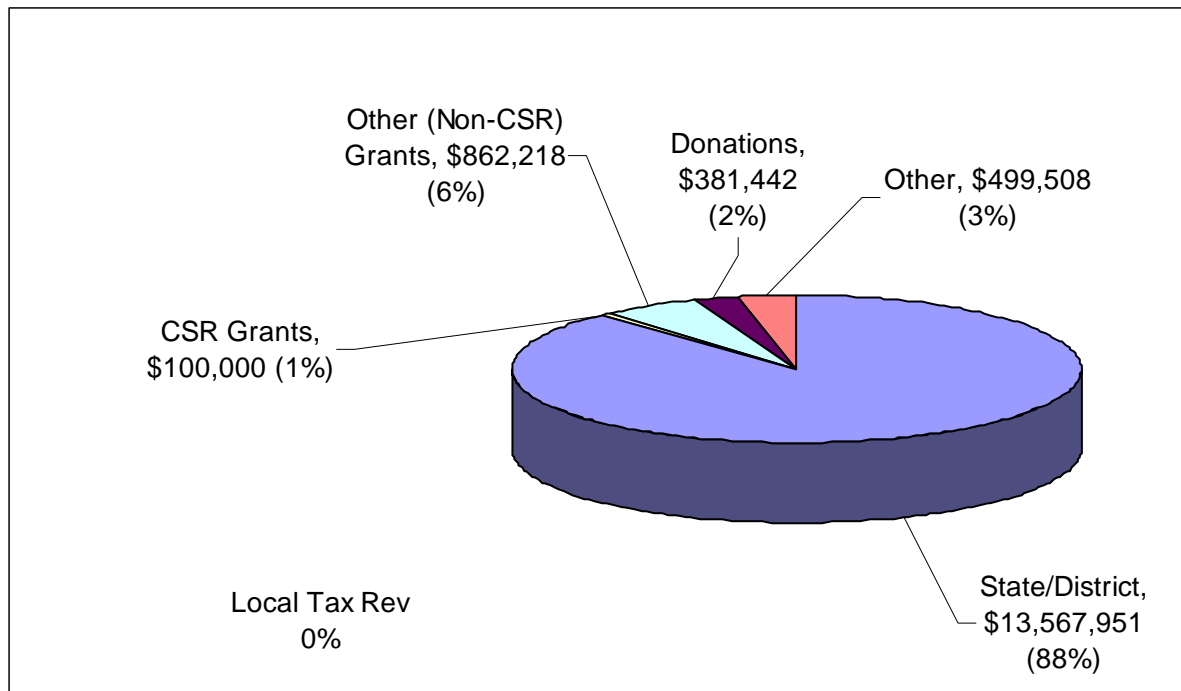
School-Family-Community Partnerships

Parent Involvement
Parents are involved with charter schools in a variety of ways. Figure 10 shows the number of schools that have parents involved in parent-teacher organizations or advisory committees (where all but one school involves parents), board membership, helping in class, tutoring, taking work home, and instructional design. Other activities include fundraising and supervising on field trips.

Business Partnerships
Ten schools mentioned having business partnerships. The partnerships benefited the schools by providing job shadowing opportunities, community-based learning opportunities (e.g., service), and support to the schools.

Figure 10. Parent Involvement in Schools
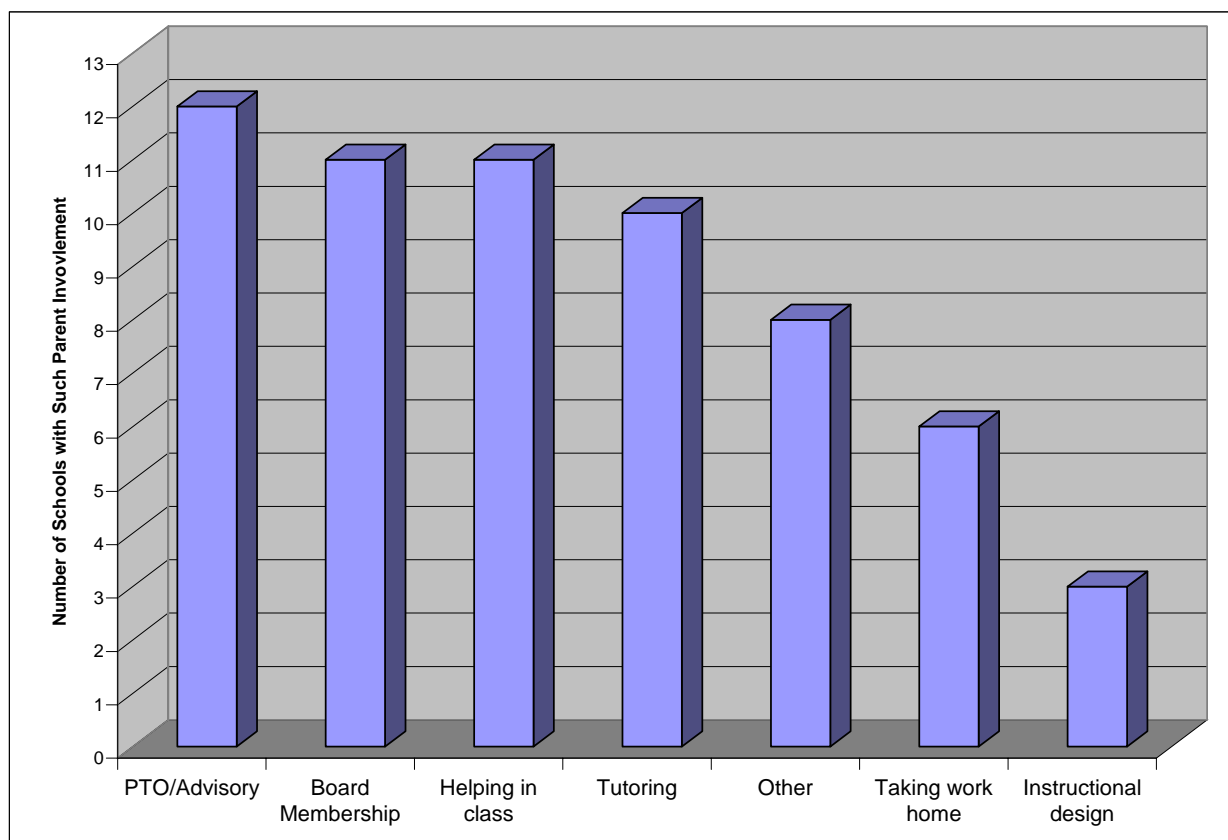
Stakeholder Survey Generalizations

Three different surveys were administered to charter school stakeholders: parents, students, and staff were given the opportunity to share their perceptions and opinions about their schools. Copies of these surveys can be found in Appendices B through D. Schools were asked to administer the surveys to all staff members who had regular contact with students and all students in the fourth grade and above. Both surveys were completed online, and a deadline was given of May 1. Parent surveys, which were mailed from the schools, were to be returned seven days after receipt or no later than April 19. A few extensions were granted, though any surveys received after May 20th are not included in the results.

Table 18 gives the numbers of surveys returned for each group in each school as well as the percentage of possible returns[9] for each school.

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[9] Staff return rates are somewhat lower than expected. Twenty-eight (28) staff surveys were not successfully transmitted after completion because of technical difficulties. A request was made that staff retake their surveys; it is not known the extent to which that request was followed.

Table 18. Number of Surveys Returned

School	Number of surveys submitted (percent of total possible returns*)		
	Students	**Parents**	**Staff**
Anser	66 (48%)	75 (70%)	19 (83%)
Blackfoot	18 (30%)	15 (41%)	13 (81%)
Coeur d'Alene	265 (91%)	119 (51%)	24 (89%)
Hidden Springs	84 (26%)	116 (59%)	3 (10%)
Idaho Leadership Academy	106 (76%)	39 (39%)	11 (65%)
Idaho Virtual Academy	137 (14%)	311 (50%)	33 (100%)
Idaho Virtual High School	38 (15%)	35 (14%)	12 (80%)
Liberty	235 (70%)	93 (48%)	12 (32%)
Meridian	128 (79%)	63 (41%)	11 (50%)
Moscow	35 (34%)	53 (62%)	11 (100%)
Pocatello	65 (36%)	56 (52%)	1 (5%)
Renaissance	60 (63%)	32 (46%)	11 (37%)
Sandpoint	82 (91%)	32 (37%)	7 (39%)
Total	**1,319 (42%)**	**1,039 (47%)**	**168 (56%)**

*Schools were asked to provide the total number of families, students, and relevant staff. Note that the total enrollment cited by schools for the surveys may differ slightly from what was noted in their profiles. Also, only students in grades 4 and above were asked to complete the survey, so return rates may appear low.

The following summarizes the overall responses of stakeholders. It must be noted that not all respondents answered all questions on their surveys; thus, when percentages are shown, they are given as percentages of those responding to a particular question, not of the total number of surveys returned.

Staff Survey
Staff responses to the survey were very positive overall. Staff appear satisfied with their schools, and believe that they are filled with opportunity. Table 19 shows the percentage of respondents by school (note that number of staff at each school varies depending on enrollment; see Table 18).

Table 19. Staff Respondents by School

School	Percentage of Total Returns
Idaho Virtual Academy	20%
Coeur d'Alene	14%
Anser	11%
Blackfoot	8%
Renaissance	7%
Moscow	7%
Meridian	7%
Liberty	7%
Idaho Virtual High School	7%
Idaho Leadership Academy	7%
Sandpoint	4%
Hidden Springs	2%
Pocatello	<1%
Total	**100% (*N*=168)**

Respondents to the staff survey had a variety of roles. The majority of respondents were teachers (54 percent), followed by specialists (10 percent) and principals/administrators (9 percent). Table 20 shows the percentage of respondents by role. "Other" respondents included office managers, counselors, and administrative assistants.

Table 20. Staff Respondents by Role

Role	Percentage of Total Returns
Teacher	54%
Instructor	5%
Teaching assistant	7%
Specialist	10%
Student teacher	0.5%
Principal/administrator	9%
Other	14%
Total	**100%**

Forty-six percent of respondents were founders or original staff members of the school. Teachers responding to the survey reported having taught in a number of different types of schools. The majority reported that they had taught in conventional public schools (for an average of eight years), followed by private/parochial schools (for an

average of three years). The respondents had been at the charter school for an average of two years.

Staff were asked to rate the importance of several factors in their decision to seek or retain employment at their charter school. Figure 11 illustrates these responses, with reasons ranked in order of importance. The responses are shown as averages, where a response of "1" is equal to "not important," "2" is equal to "somewhat important," and "3" is equal to "very important." The top reason for working at the charter school was the educational program, with an average rating of 2.9; nearly all respondents found this reason very important. Other top responses included high emphasis on academics (average rating of 2.8), safety/climate at school (2.7), and opportunity to work with like-minded educators (2.7). The least important reasons were difficult to find other positions (1.4) and convenient location (1.9).

Figure 11.
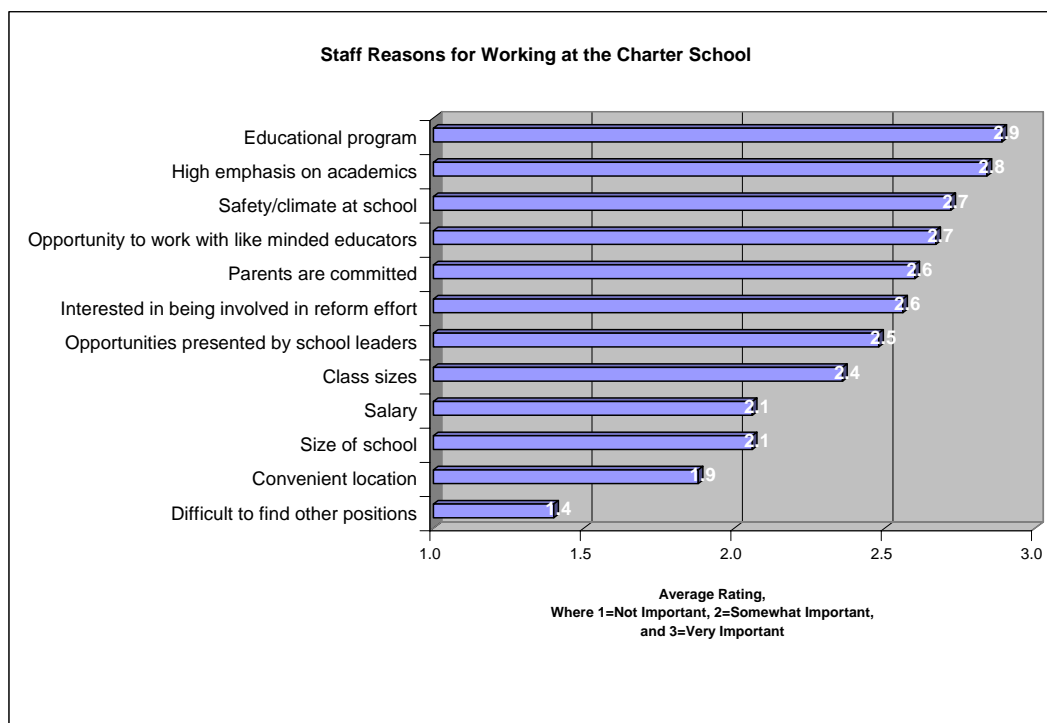
Staff were then asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of the school on a four-point scale where "1" equaled "very dissatisfied" and "4" equaled "very satisfied." Figure 12 shows average responses. Staff are most satisfied with the school mission, giving an average rating of 3.5 (which is between "satisfied" and "very satisfied"). Other top areas of satisfaction were teacher/staff collegiality, professional development opportunities, and the administrative leadership of the school (all of which received ratings of 3.4). Staff were least satisfied with their salary level (average rating of 2.8), the

school building and facilities (2.8), and fringe benefits (2.9); however, these ratings still reflect satisfaction as they are above the neutral 2.5 level.

Figure 12.
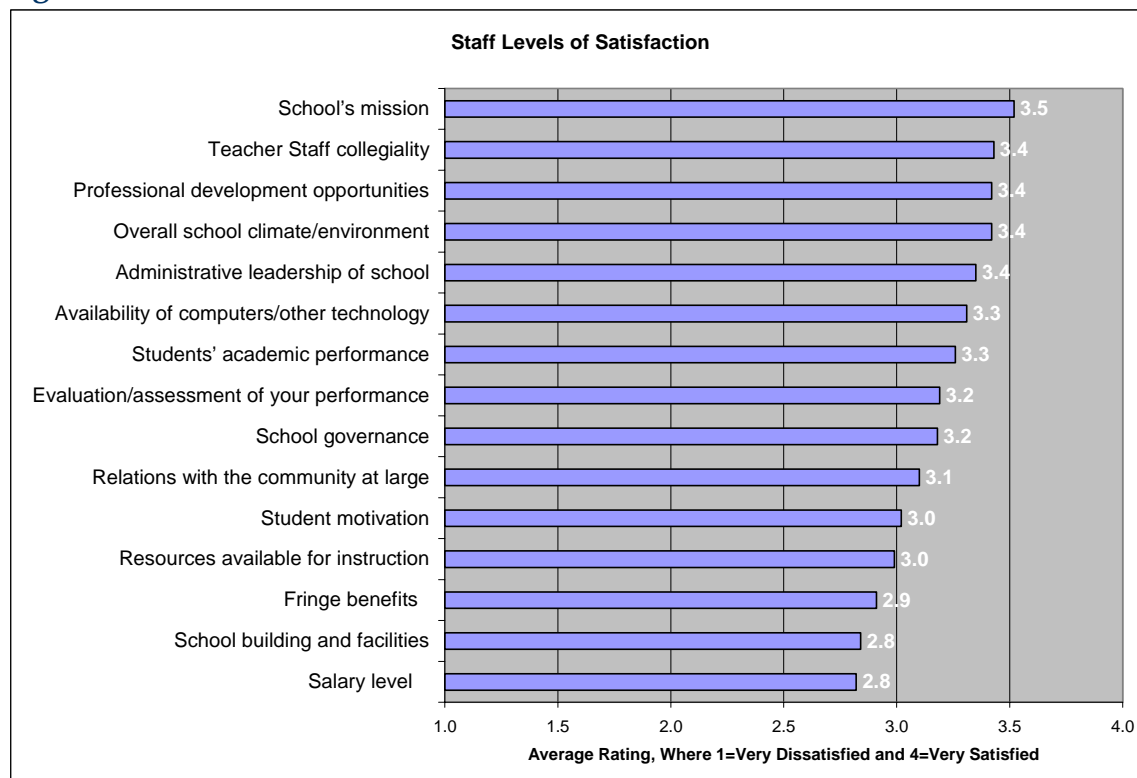
Staff were asked to rate their agreement with a number of statements about their school using a four-point scale where "1" designated strong disagreement and "4" designated strong agreement. The average responses are shown in Table 21; statements have been slightly abbreviated here for format (full statements can be found in Appendix B). Staff agreed most strongly with these statements (all of which had average ratings of 3.6):

- Teachers are challenged to be effective.
- The school has high standards and expectations.
- Students feel safe at this school.
- I think this school has a bright future.

Statements with which staff disagreed most were that class sizes are too large (average rating of 1.5), lack of student discipline hinders teaching and learning at the school (1.8), and staff are disenchanted with what can be accomplished at the school (1.8). Staff were relatively neutral on statements about availability of support services (2.5), and this is likely because some schools provide services while others do not. Staff were also neutral on whether teachers have many non-instructional duties (2.5), and whether the school had sufficient financial resources (2.3, which indicates slight disagreement).

Table 21.

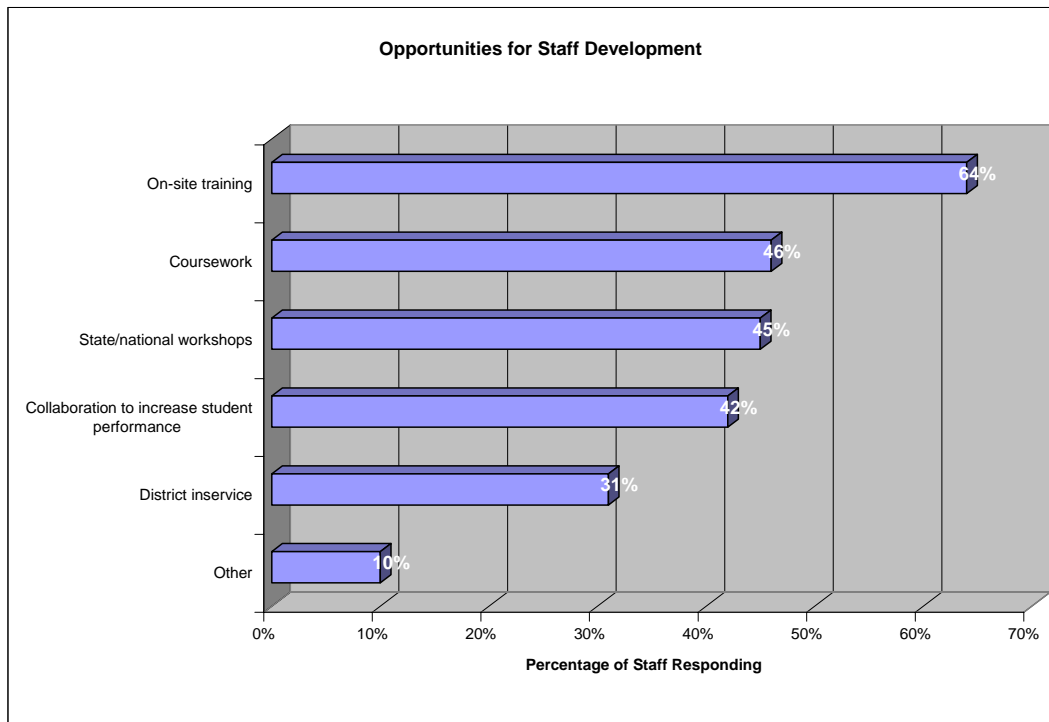| Statements About the School	Average Rating, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 4 = Strongly Agree
Teachers are challenged to be effective	3.6
The school has high standards/expectations for students	3.6
Students feel safe here	3.6
I think this school has a bright future	3.6
The quality of instruction is high	3.5
It is important for the school to be held accountable to performance goals	3.5
School is meeting needs that could not be addressed elsewhere	3.5
There is commitment to the mission of the school	3.5
Teachers are autonomous and creative in their classes	3.4
Teachers/school leadership are accountable	3.4
This school reflects a community atmosphere	3.4
There is good communication between the school and parents/guardians	3.4
I am satisfied with the educational program	3.3
Parents can influence instructional/school activities	3.3
Parents are involved in instructional/school activities	3.3
Staff are involved in decision-making	3.2
Staff reflect upon the program regularly	3.2
Teachers are able to influence the direction of the school	3.2
School has been well received by the community	3.1
Teachers and the Board work collaboratively	3.0
The students come from diverse backgrounds	3.0
Support services are available to students	2.5
Teachers have many duties	2.5
The school has sufficient financial resources	2.3
Teachers are insecure about their future	2.2
Staff are disenchanted	1.8
Lack of student discipline hinders teaching/learning	1.8
Class sizes are too large	1.5

Technical Assistance Needs

Staff were asked about what areas of technical assistance were needed at the school. The highest need cited was in the area of governance and leadership (33 percent of respondents selected this), followed by assistance in community relations (24 percent) and personnel issues (19 percent). Figure 13 illustrates the responses. "Other" areas, described in open-ended responses, included working with parent volunteers and training for board members.

Figure 13.
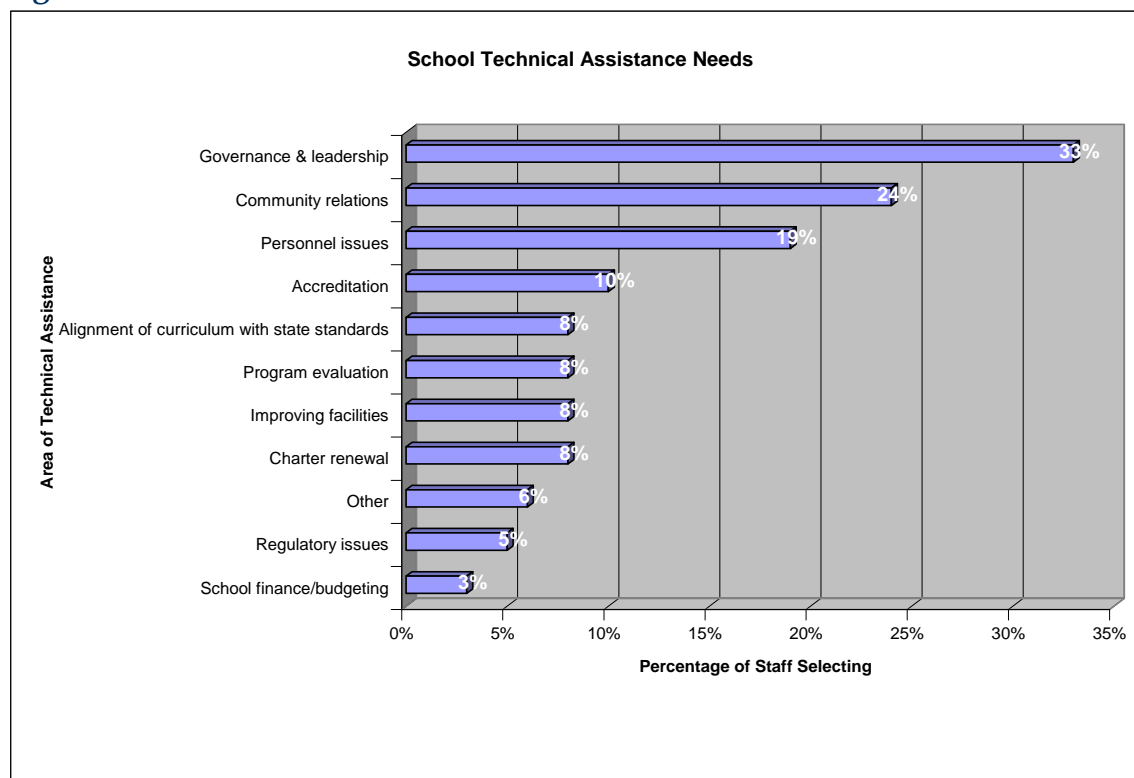
Staff Development

Staff described their opportunities for professional development. Most (64 percent) participated in on-site training, followed by coursework (46 percent), state or national workshops (45 percent), collaboration (42 percent), and district in-service (31 percent). See Figure 14. Other types of professional development that respondents listed include private seminars or workshops.

Figure 14.

Opportunities for Staff Development

Category	Percentage
On-site training	64%
Coursework	46%
State/national workshops	45%
Collaboration to increase student performance	42%
District inservice	31%
Other	10%

Percentage of Staff Responding

Evaluation

Staff reported being professionally evaluated in a variety of ways, including through regular observation, peer review, and annual formal review. Figure 15 illustrates how all respondents reported being evaluated, and then how teachers and principals/administrators are evaluated. The majority of respondents are evaluated through regular observation and annual formal review. Peer review does not occur as often, though schools are beginning a peer review process with each other through the Idaho Charter School Network (ISCN). Four percent of all staff and teachers report they are never evaluated.

Figure 15.

Process by Which Charter School Staff are Evaluated
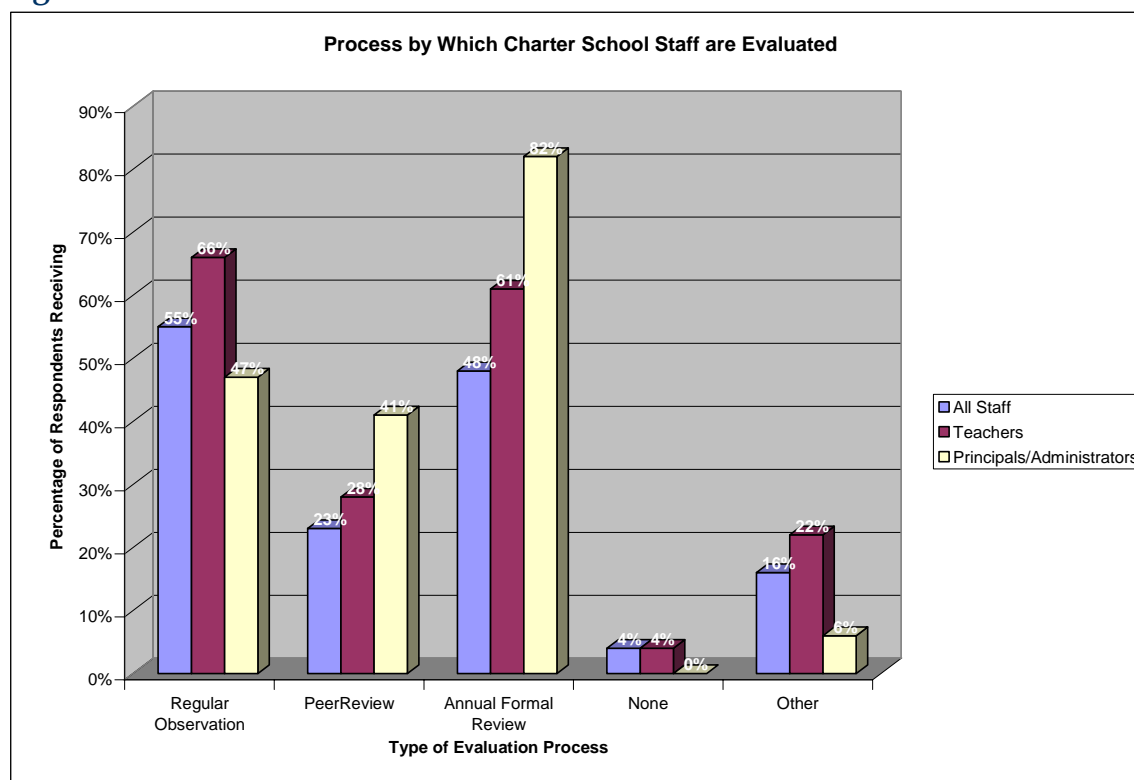
Greatest Strengths and Challenges

When asked about the greatest strengths and challenges of their charter schools, staff shared comments that cluster around key themes. Interestingly, curriculum and size were cited both as strengths and weaknesses. The most frequently mentioned strengths and challenges are shown below, in no particular order.

Greatest Strengths		Greatest Challenges
• Commitment		• Temporary facilities
• Collaboration		• Funding structure
• School mission		• School board
• Strong curriculum		• Curriculum
• School climate and size		• School size
• Parent involvement		• Energy spent on combating negative public perceptions
• High expectations of students by staff		

Parent Survey

Parent responses to the survey were very positive overall. Parents appear satisfied with their children's schools. Table 22 shows the percentage of respondents by school (note that number of parents at each school varies depending on enrollment; see Table 18). The greatest percentage of respondents are parents of Idaho Virtual Academy (which approximately reflects the percentage of Idaho students enrolled in that particular charter school).

Table 22. Parent Respondents by School

School	Percentage of Returns
Idaho Virtual Academy	30%
Coeur d'Alene	11%
Hidden Springs	11%
Liberty	9%
Anser	7%
Meridian	6%
Moscow	5%
Pocatello	5%
Idaho Leadership Academy	4%
Idaho Virtual High School	3%
Renaissance	3%
Sandpoint	3%
Blackfoot	1%
Total	**100% (N=1,039)**

Parents have an average of 1.4 children enrolled in charter schools, with the majority (674) having one child enrolled. Nearly one-tenth of parents (91) had three or four children enrolled in a charter school. Fifty-six percent of responding parents had their child(ren) enrolled for less than one year, while only 24 percent had their child(ren) enrolled more than two years (this roughly reflects the growth in charter school enrollment during the past few years).

Parents were asked how many miles away from the charter school they lived. When the two virtual schools were removed from the responses[10], the average distance from home to school was 7.1 miles. Of those families, 17 percent live within one mile of the school and 59 percent live within five miles. Fifteen percent live more than 10 miles from the school, and 3 percent live more than 30 miles away. The range of distance between school and home for non-virtual school students was 0 to 95 miles.

When asked what kind of school their children previously attended before their current charter school, 62 percent of parents responded "conventional public school." Twenty-four percent of respondents had home schooled their children, and 18 percent of students had attended Private/parochial School.

Parents were asked to rate the importance of several factors in their decision to enroll their children in the charter school. Figure 16 illustrates these responses, with reasons ranked in order of importance. The responses are shown as averages, where a response of "1" is equal to "not important," "2" is equal to "somewhat important," and "3" is equal to "very important." "Educational program" was the top reason, receiving an average rating of 2.9. Other top reasons, all of which had average ratings of 2.8, included good teachers and high-quality instruction, academic reputation, and unique opportunities for their children. The least important reasons were preference but inability to afford private school (1.6 average rating), good physical facilities (1.7), and convenient location (1.7).

"My child has special needs that are not met at other schools" was not an important reason overall (average rating of 1.8) for sending one's child to a charter school. In another question, parents were asked if the school was meeting the needs of their own special needs student. About two-thirds (69 percent) of parents stated that this did not apply (i.e., that their child is not a "special needs student"). One-quarter (25 percent) stated the school was meeting their child's special needs. Only 3 percent responded "no" or "don't know." (See Figure 16.) The lack of a definition of "special needs" makes this result difficult to evaluate since parents could interpret it freely. However, when parents perceived that their child had a special need, it became a strong motivating force to enroll the child in a charter school and was given a ranking of 2.6 by those parents.

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[10] Virtual school students go to school at home, which is a distance of zero miles. Because of the large percentage of virtual school parents in the sample, an average distance from home to school based on the inclusion of those schools would be inappropriately skewed. It also appears that some parents of virtual school students responded with the mileage from their homes to their respective virtual charter school business office.
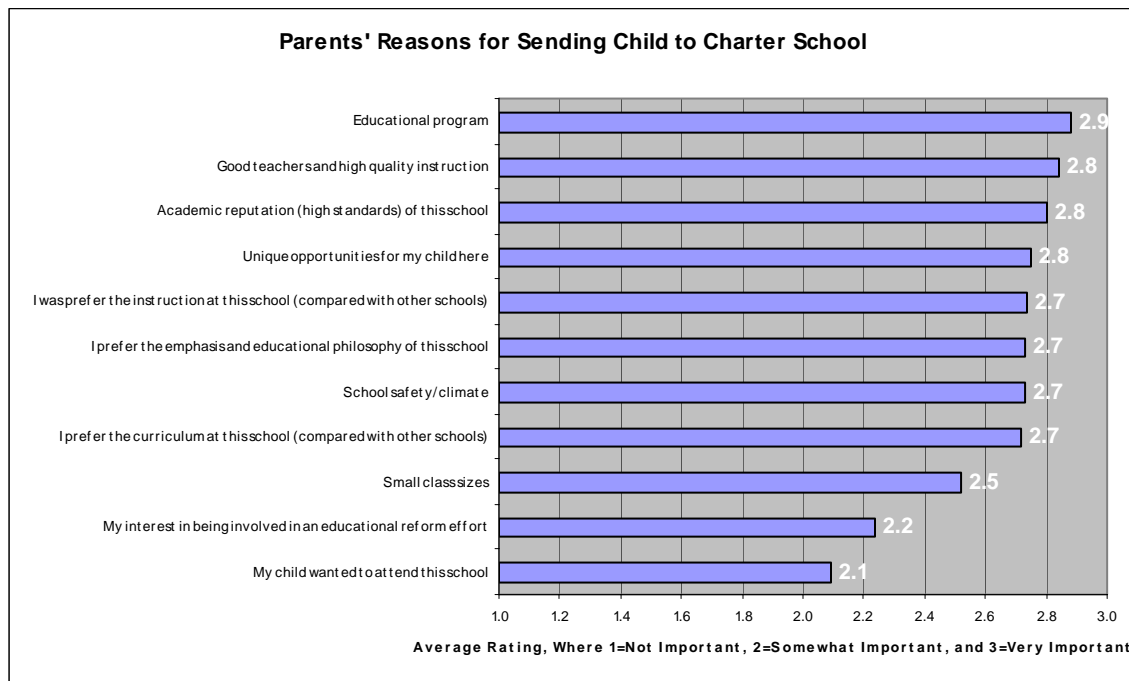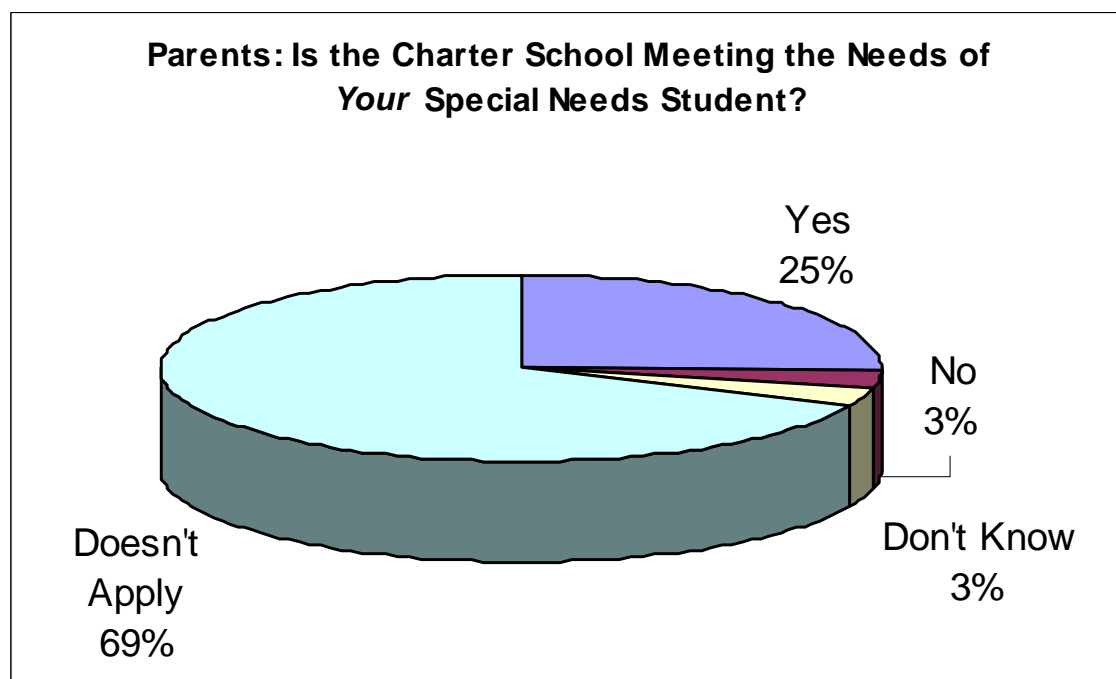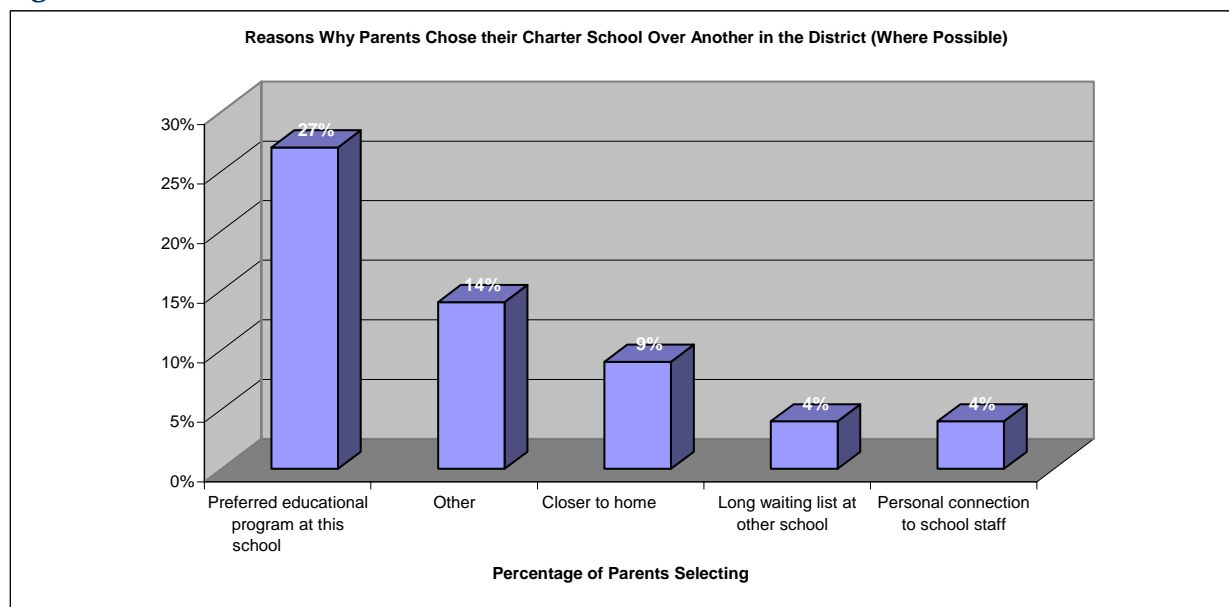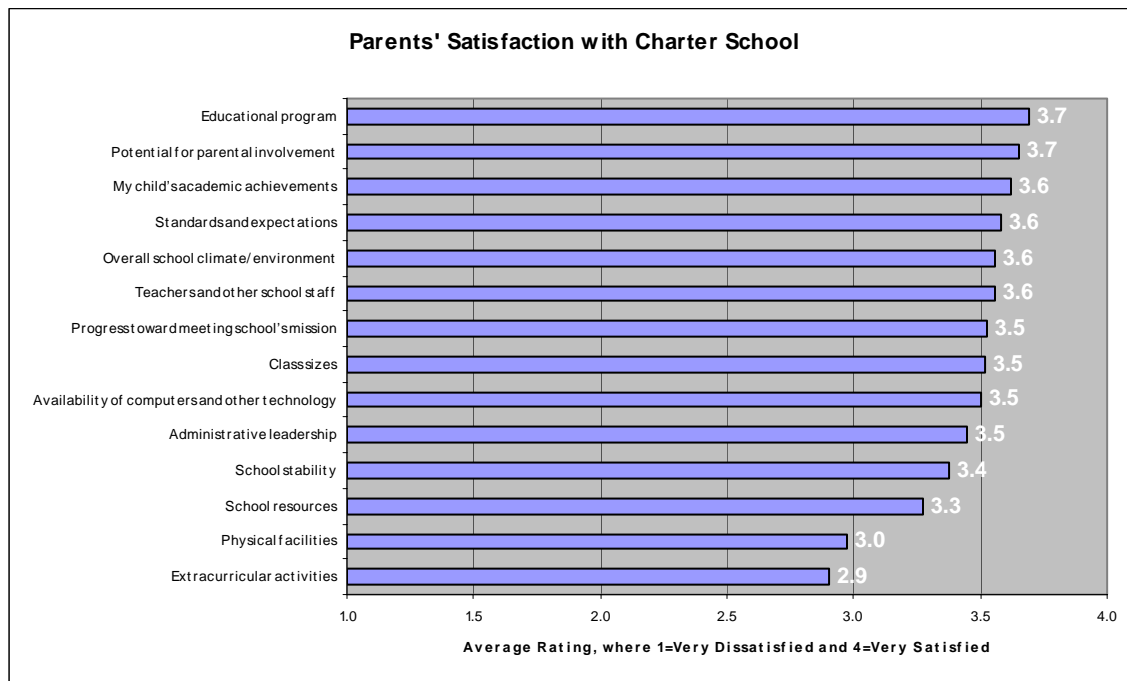
Figure 16.

Parents' Reasons for Sending Child to Charter School

Reason	Average Rating
Educational program	2.9
Good teachers and high quality instruction	2.8
Academic reputation (high standards) of this school	2.8
Unique opportunities for my child here	2.8
I was prefer the instruction at this school (compared with other schools)	2.7
I prefer the emphasis and educational philosophy of this school	2.7
School safety/climate	2.7
I prefer the curriculum at this school (compared with other schools)	2.7
Small class sizes	2.5
My interest in being involved in an educational reform effort	2.2
My child wanted to attend this school	2.1

Average Rating, Where 1=Not Important, 2=Somewhat Important, and 3=Very Important

Figure 17.

Parents: Is the Charter School Meeting the Needs of *Your* Special Needs Student?

Yes 25%
No 3%
Don't Know 3%
Doesn't Apply 69%

Parents were asked if there were other charters in their school districts. While only Boise and Moscow School Districts each have two charters, 20 percent of parents responded with "don't know." Of the 276 parents who have two charters in their school districts, the number one reason for selecting their current charter school was the

preference for the educational program at the school. (See Figure 18.) Other reasons included knowing staff at the school, and location.
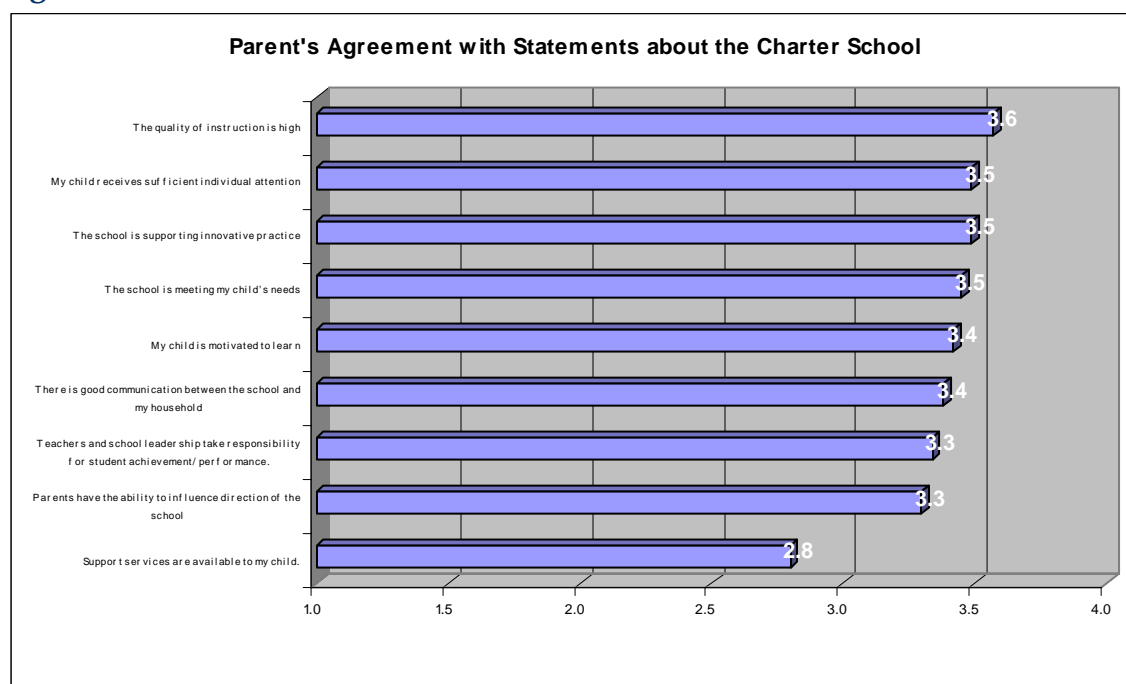
Parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with a number of items using a four-point scale, where 1 = very dissatisfied and 4 = very satisfied. Figure 19 shows average ratings for each item. Overall, parents are more than satisfied with most aspects of their charter school, with 12 of 14 items receiving ratings between 3.0 and 4.0. Parents are most satisfied with the educational program (which was the number one reason for sending their child to the school in the first place) and potential for parental involvement, with both receiving average ratings of 3.7. Parents are least satisfied with extracurricular activities and physical facilities, though these two items still received positive ratings of 2.9 and 3.0, respectively.

Figure 18.

Reasons Why Parents Chose their Charter School Over Another in the District (Where Possible)

Figure 19.

Parents' Satisfaction with Charter School

Category	Rating
Educational program	3.7
Potential for parental involvement	3.7
My child's academic achievements	3.6
Standards and expectations	3.6
Overall school climate/environment	3.6
Teachers and other school staff	3.6
Progress toward meeting school's mission	3.5
Class sizes	3.5
Availability of computers and other technology	3.5
Administrative leadership	3.5
School stability	3.4
School resources	3.3
Physical facilities	3.0
Extracurricular activities	2.9

Average Rating, where 1=Very Dissatisfied and 4=Very Satisfied

Parents were presented with a number of statements and asked to rate their agreement with them on a four-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Again, most responses were very positive, with eight of the nine statements showing an average of 3.3 or higher (see Figure 20). Most parents agreed that the quality of instruction at the charter school is high (average rating of 3.6). Parents were neutral on whether support services (e.g., counseling, health care, etc.) were available for their children (average rating of 2.8; this likely reflects the fact that only some schools offer such services on site (see *Characteristics* section, Table 17).

Figure 20.

Parent's Agreement with Statements about the Charter School

Statement	Value
The quality of instruction is high	3.6
My child receives sufficient individual attention	3.5
The school is supporting innovative practice	3.5
The school is meeting my child's needs	3.5
My child is motivated to learn	3.4
There is good communication between the school and my household	3.4
Teachers and school leadership take responsibility for student achievement/performance.	3.3
Parents have the ability to influence direction of the school	3.3
Support services are available to my child.	2.8

Parents were asked to state how they have been involved in the school (see Figure 21). Most parents (48 percent) said that they volunteered in the classroom or for special events. Nineteen percent were not involved at all, while 10 percent were part of a school committee. "Other" types of involvement included working with students on homework, serving lunch, and fundraising activities.

Figure 21.

Parent Involvement in the Charter School
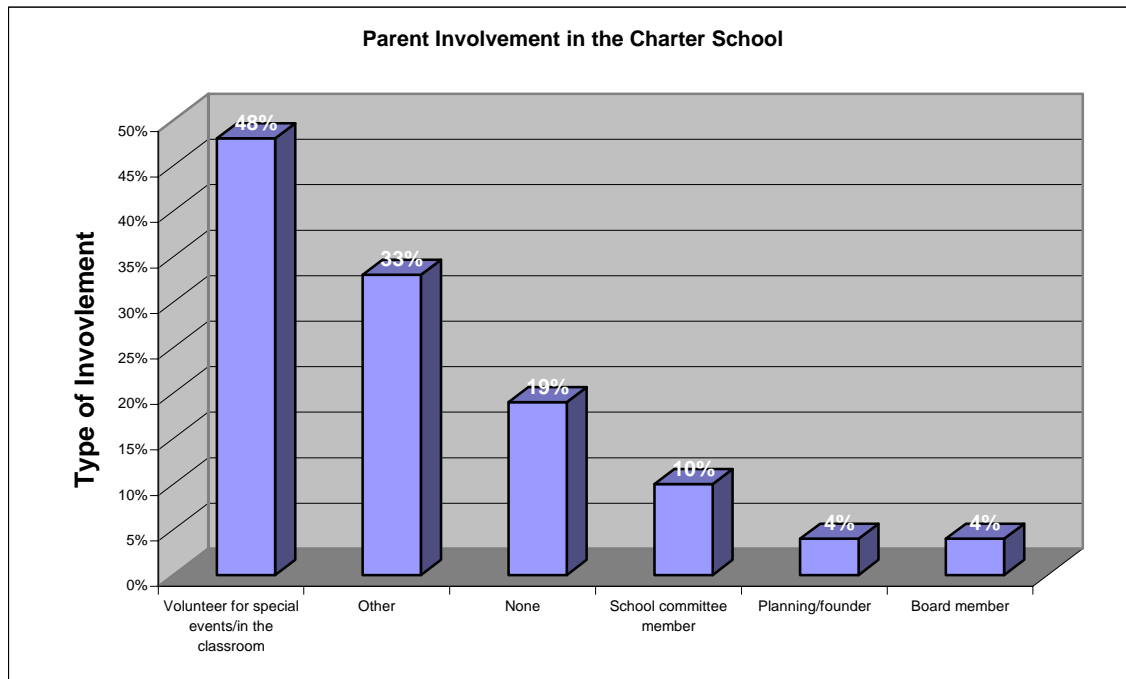
Finally, parents were asked to describe the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the charter school. The following list summarizes (in no particular order) the most frequently cited responses:

Greatest Strengths		Greatest Weaknesses
- Educational program - Staff - Small size - Relationship with parents - Families - Dress code - Fewer social problems - Student accountability - Flexibility (in virtual schools) - Ability for students to work at own pace		- Facility - Lowering expectations - Leadership/Administration - Teacher turnover - Focus on test scores - Lack of extracurricular activities - Insufficient funding - Communication with parents - Distance from home to school - Sponsoring district

Student Survey

Student responses to the survey were very positive overall. Students appear to enjoy their experience at their charter schools. Table 23 shows the percentage of respondents by school.

Table 23. Student Respondents by School

School	Percentage of Returns
Coeur d'Alene	20%
Liberty	18%
Idaho Virtual Academy	10%
Meridian	10%
Idaho Leadership Academy	8%
Hidden Springs	6%
Sandpoint	6%
Anser	5%
Pocatello	5%
Renaissance	5%
Idaho Virtual High School	3%
Moscow	3%
Blackfoot	1%
Total	**100%** **(N = 1,319)**

Respondents to the student survey were in a wide span of grade levels (see Table 24). While the instructions for survey administration stated that only students in grades 4 and above should complete the surveys, a few schools included responses from students in primary grades (first through third).

Table 24. Student Respondents by Grade Level

Grade Level	Percentage of Returns
1st	<1%
2nd	<1%
3rd	3%
4th	10%
5th	15%
6th	11%
7th	13%
8th	12%
9th	14%
10th	10%
11th	8%
12th	4%
Total	**100%**

48

Student respondents were asked how long they had been enrolled at the charter. The majority (45 percent) stated that this was their first year. Nearly a third (29 percent) had been attending the school for three or more years.

First-year students were asked how interested they were in their schoolwork at the charter school compared with that of their previous school. Sixty-four percent stated that they were more interested, while 28 percent said their interest was about the same. Only 9 percent stated that they were less interested in their current schoolwork.

First-year students were also asked why they decided to attend the charter school. A number of reasons for attending were presented and students were asked to rate the reasons on a three-point scale, where a "1" meant "not important," a "2" meant "somewhat important," and a "3" meant "very important." Figure 22 shows that the most important reasons was that students' parents thought the charter school was the best school for them (average rating of 2.6), followed by the notion that teachers were better at the charter school than at other school options (2.5). The two least important reasons were having friends that attended the school (1.7) and location (1.8). In response to an open-ended question inviting other reasons, students also listed the educational program, emphasis on academics, and that attending was the respondent's own choice.

Figure 22.
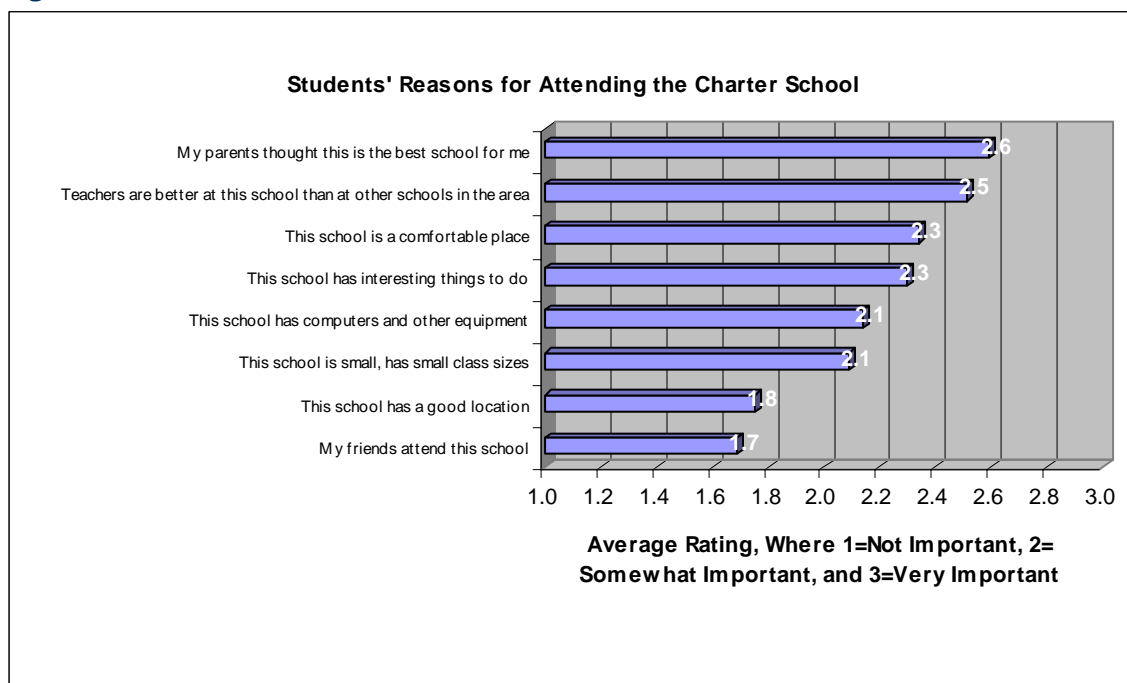
When students were asked how they were doing in school, three-quarters (75 percent) stated that their performance was "excellent" or "good." Only 7 percent were doing "not so well" or "very badly."

Students were given a number of statements about their school, and were asked to rate their agreement with them using a four-point scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree). Figure 23 illustrates that students were positive overall about their schools, with all statements receiving agreement. (Note that some of the statements have been rephrased slightly to fit the graph format; a full copy of survey with the statements in their entirety can be found in Appendix D.) Students agreed most strongly with these statements:

- Teachers and administrators know me by name (average rating of 3.6, which is between "agree" and "strongly agree")
- There are rules at the school we must follow (3.5)
- I feel safe at this school (3.4)
- The school is doing a good job preparing me for the future (3.4)
- My teacher is available to talk with me or help me when I need it (3.4)
- I think I am learning more here than I would elsewhere (3.4)

While students are positive about what the school offers them, respondents were only slightly agreeable with statements about student voice. "I feel as though my ideas are listened to" and "students have some power in this school" each only received average ratings of 2.9 (just above a neutral rating of 2.5).

50

Figure 23.

Students' Agreement with Statements About Their Schools

Statement	Average Rating
Teachers and administrators know me by my name	3.6
There are rules here we must follow	3.5
I feel safe at this school	3.4
This school is doing a good job preparing me for the future	3.4
My teacher is available to talk to me or help me when needed	3.4
I think that I am learning more here than I would elsewhere	3.4
The school building is clean/well taken care of	3.3
There are students with different types of backgrounds here	3.3
Teachers seem happy at our school	3.2
I have a computer available when I need one	3.2
I get feedback on most or all of my assignments	3.2
The students at this school come from diverse backgrounds	3.1
Students take responsibility for their own learning here	3.1
I wish there were more classes to choose from	3.1
Students feel important here	3.1
I know the mission of my school	3.0
I feel as though my ideas are listened to	2.9
Students have some power in this school	2.9
If the teacher left the class most students would continue to work	2.9
Students respect one another/each other's property	2.9

Average Rating, Where 1=Strongly Disagree and 4=Strongly Agree

Students were asked what they liked and disliked the most about their school. Overall, the majority of students were extremely positive about their experience at the charter school. The following list summarizes (in no particular order) the most frequently cited responses:

Positive	Negative
• Relevant curriculum • Teacher quality, interactions • Teaching methods	• Lack of extracurricular classes • Teacher quality, interactions • Small school size, no playground
• Small size • Being able to learn at home (in virtual schools)	• Limited number of classes from which to choose • Lack of student voice
• Positive student body, less social pressure than at conventional public schools, less emphasis on fashion • Multi-grade classes	• Nothing! (this was by far the most common response, with at least 6 percent of students giving it) • New students who don't work as hard as others

Multiple Stakeholders

There were three areas in which at least two of the stakeholder groups were asked their opinions: special needs, mission, and expectations. Each of these areas is presented in turn.

Special Needs

Staff and students were asked if they believed the charter school met the needs of "special needs" students. More than three-quarters (79 percent) of staff and two-thirds (65 percent) of students believed that the schools were meeting those needs. Only a very small percentage of staff and students either said "no" or "does not apply." See Figure 24.

Figure 24.

Is Your Charter School Meeting the Needs of Special Needs Students?
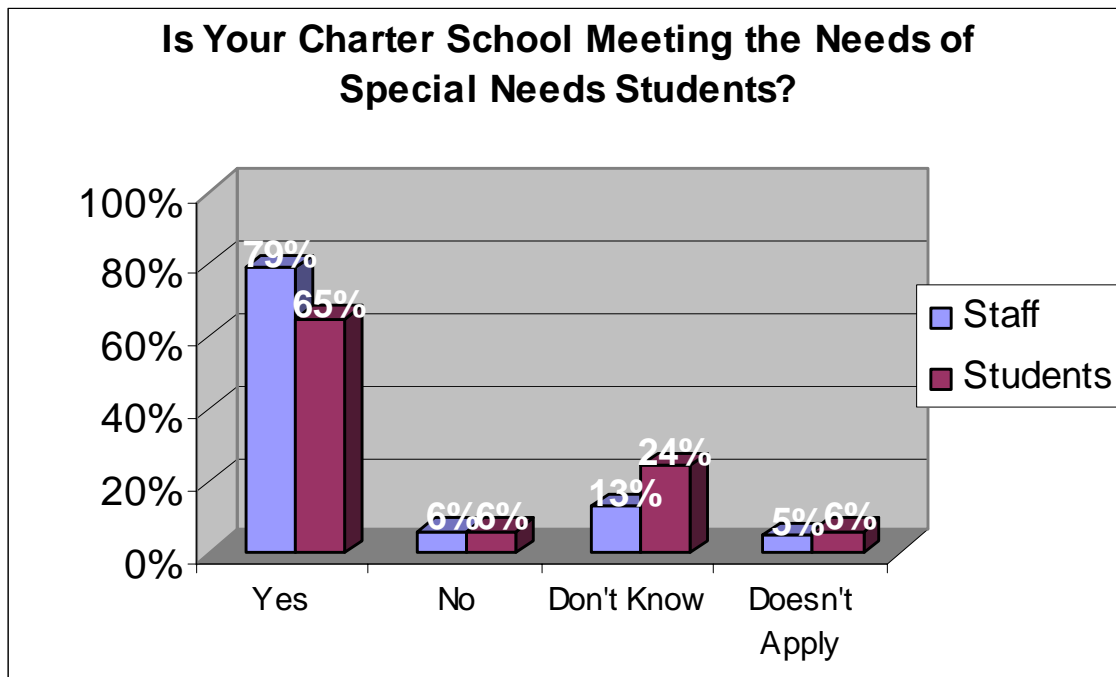
Mission

Staff and parents were asked the extent to which the charter school was meeting its mission. On a five-point scale (where 1 = did not address, 2 = partially meeting, 3 = meeting, 4 = exceeding, and 5 = don't know), staff and parents rated charter school accomplishments very highly. Both staff and parents believed that charter schools were slightly exceeding their missions (average ratings[11] of 3.4 and 3.2, respectively). Only 4 percent of parents and less than 1 percent of staff responded "don't know" to this question. One hundred percent of parents stated that they supported their school mission, with more than three-quarters (77 percent) saying that they "strongly supported" it.

Expectations

Staff and parents were asked if the charter school had met their initial expectations (see Figure 25). Both groups responded overwhelmingly positively, with 90 percent of staff and 94 percent of parents saying "yes." About 70 of the 168 participating staff had comments, which were both positive and negative. The following gives a representative sampling of the range of statements from staff:

> "It has been rough at times ironing out the wrinkles and finding what works best. The continual changes in policy have been difficult at times but necessary."

> "I am working harder than I ever anticipated, but the intrinsic rewards make it worth it."

> "We are a 'work in process.' I like and am committed to what the school is striving to do."

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[11] Averages do not include responses of "5," since the "don't know" responses would inappropriately inflate them.

"Overall, [the school has met my initial expectations]. However, I do think that the vision of the school has changed considerably since the opening. It started out as a school with high academic standards and student accountability and although we still focus on academics, I think we are gradually becoming more and more "warm and fuzzy" with the students and not holding them to as high of standards."

"The work with the Charter school has brought its own set of challenges, but it truly opened my eyes to another entire world of education."

"I had anticipated that charter schools would have received sufficient resources to provide adequate educational services to students. The insufficient funding, especially for facilities, is pathetic."

"The educational day is different than what I envisioned, but the population has necessitated it be so."

"[The charter school] provides a safe and pleasant working environment. The administration trusts and appreciates individual ability and effort. It is very nice!"

"I was under the impression that the school had a curriculum plan that would allow us to serve the students in a matter fitting with the charter. I was sadly mistaken."

A representative sampling of parent comments included:

"The [charter school] has been the best school for my child."

"Excellent experience so far."

"The first two years [my expectations have been met], but this year has been disappointing. The new head teacher wanted to make us more like a public school."

"Very pleased with rigorous course content."

"Lots of frustrations and misunderstandings during the first year."

"I'm disappointed with the quality of some of the kids that have been allowed in."

"Too much homework – stressful for family life."

Figure 25.

Has the Charter School Met your Initial Expecations?

- 90% Staff (Yes)
- 94% Parents (Yes)
- 10% Staff (No)
- 6% Parents (No)
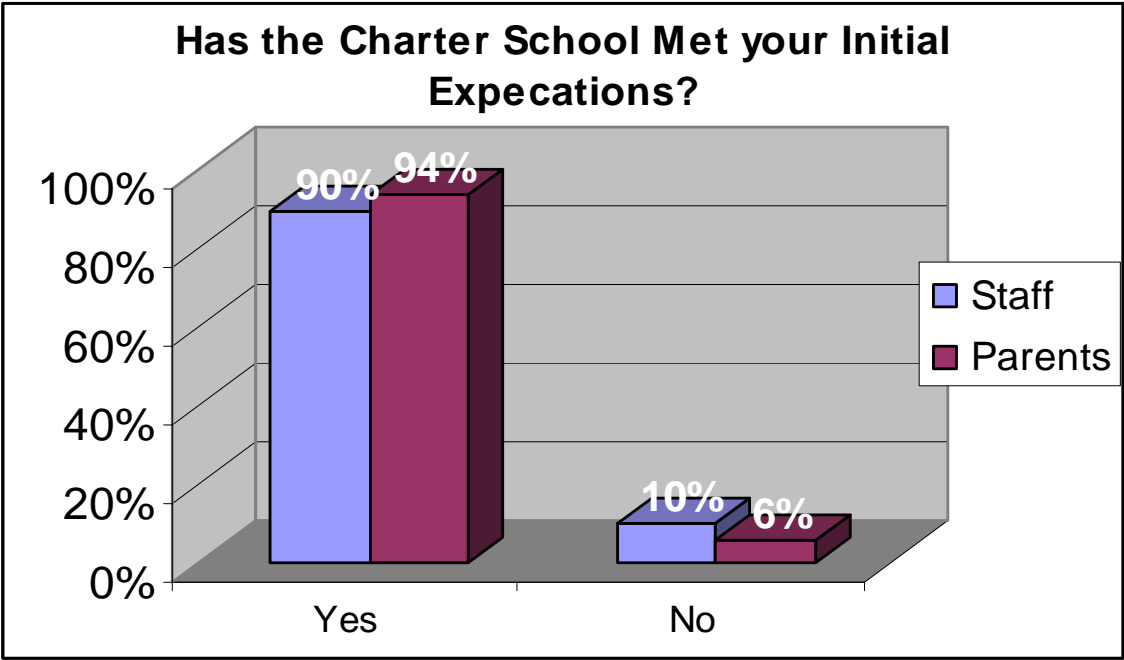
Site Visits

In May 2003, the author visited four Idaho charter schools. Three of the schools were new on the scene this year; Idaho Virtual Academy, Idaho Virtual High School, and Idaho Leadership Academy all opened their doors to students in the fall of 2002. Liberty Charter School (which became operational in fall 1999 and was formerly known as Nampa Charter School) has expanded to include high school and has recently moved into a new facility.

What follows is a summary of observations and focus group discussions. The summaries include stories of the school as told to the author by staff, students, parents, and board members. As with all previously established charter schools in Idaho, each school had in common that the founders want something different for children than what is offered in the conventional public system. New schools also held the belief that they are each one option for Idaho students and that their programs were not necessarily appropriate for all students.

Idaho Virtual Academy

The Idaho Virtual Academy (IVA) is one of two new virtual (online) charter schools in Idaho. The school serves Kindergarten through fifth-grade students and their families. The majority of the school's 1,000 students reside in the Treasure Valley area (Boise/Caldwell/Nampa), though many participate from other locations. The home office of the school is located in Butte County. A central testing facility, which was visited by the author[12], is located in Boise in an industrial complex.

The school offers the "K12" curriculum[13], which is described as a very challenging core knowledge program that is aligned with state standards. The material is sequential and employs a variety of teaching methods and student activities (reading, writing, calculating, speaking, listening, singing, acting, drawing) in addition to having students use computers to complete assignments. Families are set up with a computer and a printer, and are reimbursed for online access. They also receive a box of all the (non-electronic) materials they will need for their child's lessons, including trade books, paints, paper, math and science manipulatives, etc.

At first glance, the arrangement appears similar to home school. Parents assist their children in the learning process. However, unlike most home schooling, teachers work with families (at a ratio of about 50-to-1) to ensure that work is being completed in a timely manner and that it is of quality. Families are also encouraged to set aside an area in the home that is designated as "the classroom." The head of the school describes the educational as "public school in a home school environment."

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[12] The author met with the head of school and the academic director. Because of the virtual nature of the school, no students or parents were present for a face-to-face interviews or focus groups.
[13] More information about the program can be found at www.k12.com.

IVA is proud that is it able to provide oversight for many of Idaho's home schoolers, which constitute approximately half its enrollment. IVA is able to offer families appropriate curriculum as well as ensuring accountability. One student lives several hours from the nearest school and would not otherwise have access to a challenging academic program. Often, home schooling becomes difficult when children reach the upper elementary grade levels and parents have a harder time keeping up with ever more challenging content. Another challenge for home schoolers is the accountability piece when no one is pushing for assignments to be completed or certain levels of achievement to be attained. IVA believes that parents are the first source of education, and that it is there to support that education. The academic director states that students view themselves as having two teachers: their parent and the IVA teacher.

The technological component of the program runs smoothly. K12 manages the online workings of the program, and offers parents technology support as needed. Many families come to the program without much computer experience; when first enrolling in the program, teachers walk parents through the process of setting up their computers and how to log into the program. K12 was also responsible for much of the early advertising of the program, from radio spots to advertisements in home school networks. A series of "grass roots information sessions" were also held to give prospective families more information about the program. These components are part of the contractual arrangement IDVA has with K12.

After taking a placement test to determine their ability level in core areas, students are placed on an individualized education plan. This may allow a fourth-grade student to be working on fifth-grade math, if appropriate. Students are also offered a certain degree of flexibility with their online learning. Rather than working in traditional daily blocks of time for each subject, students may spend two full days on language arts and then move on to other subjects later in the week.

In order to stay on target with their learning, students and parents can clearly see what needs to be accomplished in a given week. A schedule, which is automatically generated by the K12 program, is uploaded and updated each time a student logs in.

Students are not graded. In order to satisfactorily pass a class, students must progress through 80 percent of the curriculum by the end of the year. In math, for example, student must master a certain level of achievement before moving forward. In order for the school to receive its average daily attendance (ADA) funds, students must be logged in at least 25 hours per week. Because much of the work is done online, progress and attendance are automatically documented; thus, teachers can carefully monitor progress and hours spent on each subject.

Teachers are available on weekdays by phone or e-mail, and conduct bi-weekly conferences with parents. If a student is falling behind in a class, the teacher will work with the family to help get the student back on track. IVA's academic director, who was a teacher at the school

until recently, states that parents' biggest challenge is not the curriculum, but how to set up the home classroom. Parents now have on online discussion board to support each other and to give each other ideas on how to facilitate learning in the home.

In order for students to have social connections, regional outings take place monthly. Students are also encouraged to participate in local youth groups or activities. Students are often dually enrolled in their neighborhood schools so that they may participate in extracurricular activities (e.g., band).

State-mandated testing has been one of the biggest challenges for the school, with some families driving four hours one way in order for their children to be proctored for the exams. This resulted in many students taking all the tests in one day, rather than spreading them out over a week as is typically done in conventional public schools. Another challenge has been disagreements over how much money is due the school. The head of school readily admits that IVA does not require as much in the way of financial resources as conventional "bricks and mortar" district schools that also receive funding based on property taxes, but feels that the school should receive the funding from some categorical funds (e.g. transportation).

While the head of school believes that the K12 program offers the best education, she does not believe that the program is for everyone. Some families have left the program because parents are unable to stay home or they are unable to commit to keeping up with work. Families with several children also have more of a challenging time managing several grade levels of work simultaneously. Some students prefer a more social environment, and may not do well in a virtual academic setting. Rather, the head of school advocates for a choice for parents.

Idaho Virtual High School

The Idaho Virtual High School (IVHS) first began as an idea to support Idaho students who needed a way to get supplemental courses. The principal of the school, a former teacher and alternative high school principal, home schooled his own children and saw a need for other options for home schoolers. Because the school would essentially be started from scratch, a charter was a way for the school to obtain funding needed to build infrastructure. The author met with the school principal at the central office in Mountain Home[14].

At the start of its operations, IVHS began by leasing courses from the Florida Online High School. The program was managed by using Blackboard, a widespread system for content management and sharing, online assessments, student tracking, assignment management, and virtual interactions. IVHS designed the Web site to provide the interface between the courses and Blackboard. The school is currently in the process of developing its own courses for next year; these will be based on Idaho learning standards. In addition to their online participation, students will receive supplemental compact discs that contain video and audio clips whose larger file sizes prohibit fluid streaming over the Internet.

IVHS runs a program similar to the state-funded Idaho Digital Learning Academy (IDLA), the latter of which is funded through a state appropriation of $450,000 and participation fees paid by schools in which students are enrolled rather than the state ADA funding received by charters. IVHS monitors its students' attendance in a unique way: Each assignment has a seat time value. All assignments in a particular course add up to 90 hours (which is equal to 1 hour per day per semester). One unique aspect of the school is the starting time option. For each course, students may start at 10 different times throughout the quarter. This prevents students from having to wait until a new quarter to begin their classes if they miss the first starting date. The combination of seat time value of assignments and the flexibility of online learning make this possible.

IVHS is marketed broadly to all high school counselors. Letters are sent to the counselors informing them of the IVHS option for students. Counselors, in turn, refer students to the school. The school is careful to point out that online learning may not be appropriate for all students, suggesting that the medium works best for students who are dedicated and "learn best in a non-distracting, non-intimidating environment."

Accountability in this online system is paramount. In accordance with its 90 percent attendance rule, if a student is more than 10 percent behind, he or she is automatically dropped from the course. Students are required to take weekly quizzes in addition to their regular assignments. Teachers monitor student work carefully. If students do not complete work accurately or properly, it is returned to them.

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[14] Because of the virtual nature of the school, no staff, students, or parents were present for face-to-face interviews or focus groups.

Students and teachers communicate primarily via e-mail or phone. While there has been some criticism of online learning because it offers relatively little social contact, the principal believes that students actually relate to teachers more online than they would in a regular classroom. Students are able to ask questions without fear of ridicule from peers (as is often the case in conventional high school classes). The online venue is appealing to those students who typically linger in the background, since the playing field in cyberspace tends to be equalized.

For security, IVHS has a database that stores each e-mail. The system only allows e-mail to be sent within the IVHS setting, between students and their teachers and among staff. This provides running documentation as well as privacy and appropriate use of school property (e-mail may not be sent from the system to an outside address).

IVHS offers online courses to both full-time and part-time students. This year, enrollment fluctuated between 350 and 400 students. Full-time students tend to stay enrolled, while part-time students may leave the program after completing a particular course. Students may take additional courses beyond their full-time loads, though they are required by law to pay tuition for those credit hours. Full-time students may also request special education services, though it is up to them (and their parents) to do so.

A challenging issue for the school has been participation in state testing. Part-time students take the ISAT at their district school. This year, because of logistics of proctoring, full-time students took the ISAT at their home district schools as well. In the future, however, students will need to take them through IVHS in order to graduate from the school.

The principal of the school says IVHS as "one option among many" and he does not see virtual learning becoming "mainstream." He states that "online learning is convenient, but it's not easy!"

Idaho Leadership Academy

The Idaho Leadership Academy (ILA) is located in Pingree, a small town just northeast of the American Falls Reservoir. In total, ILA serves students in 15 districts and states its attendance area as "the State of Idaho" though it is not allowed to serve more than 2.9 percent of any one district's students. The school serves students in grades 9 through 12, roughly two-thirds of whom commute to the actual school building. Transportation is provided, and some students travel up to three hours a day on the bus. The remaining students participate through a distance-learning program. The school is housed in an old elementary school that the district closed last year. Rooms are comfortable, with each offering a choice of tables and chairs or sofas.

ILA's program is based on the Great Books, and is described as "classical leadership curriculum, emphasizing a liberal arts education: reading, writing, calculating, and rhetoric." The mission of ILA is to "inspire future leaders to govern themselves by principles learned through study, reason, observation, experience, and a continual search for truth." The program itself is structured in a unique way. Small groups of about 12 onsite students are assigned a mentor with whom they study a core subject for an entire trimester. The core courses of study occur for three-and-a-half to four hours per day, in the mornings, with two hour-and-a-half electives in the afternoon. The school does not have any bells to announce a change in classes; this allows students to work through the morning without "shifting gears every 70 minutes."

During their core classes, students are required to read up to two classic books per week. Students read for one-and-a-half to two hours per day. They then discuss what they've read with their mentor and each other to make meaning of the works. A heavy emphasis is placed on this constructive approach, and students carry learning logs to record their thoughts throughout the day. Electives are non-core classes--creative writing, fencing, foreign language, leadership, etc. All courses are ungraded, though students must meet minimum standards to pass their courses.

Each student creates a portfolio of his or her work in core subjects, as well as in leadership and service (which are required for all students) and other electives in which they have participated. To graduate, seniors are required to present their portfolio and go in front of a panel to defend what they have learned. If the panel is not satisfied, they will ask the student to redo a particular section again. The administration states that the accountability of the school goes above and beyond state requirements. In addition, the school staff actively assist students in finding college scholarships through an Idaho-based financial group that is part of a national scholarship network.

Small-group mentors have bachelors or master's degrees, though they are not certified teachers. They teach under the supervision of a certified teacher, who is also the academic director of the school. The teacher lays out the curriculum and makes sure it is aligned with

Idaho state standards. In addition to working with a group, each mentor works one-on-one with each student to review accomplishments and set goals on an individualized basis. After each such session, reports are provided to the lead teacher. Students who are on individualized education plans (IEPs) are monitored in their work on a daily or weekly basis.

The mentors are excited to be part of an educational reform effort that is based on leadership education and mentoring through a classic course of study. They find it a place to practice what they have been studying about in their college or graduate programs. Several of the mentors had previous relationships with the founding members or administration of the school. Another sought out involvement after trying, and disliking, "the public school system." One mentor attended a college that also emphasized the Great Books, and so wished to work at the school to give back to society. The mentors greatly appreciate the caps on class size as well as the multi-grade environment. They also enjoy the opportunity to be both "educators and advocates" for the students.

Many of the students who come to ILA are not college bound. Some are students who did not fit in at the conventional public school they attended; others are previously home-schooled students whose parents were unable to offer them adequate educational opportunities. The school administration describes these students as the "intelligent bored," who are not necessarily straight A students, but want to be challenged and are willing to work hard. To be successful at the school, students say the will to learn and believe in oneself are key.

Students are of mixed grade levels in some of their groups, though freshman and seniors are in some specific courses to meet state requirements. Students appreciate being able to work with each other regardless of differing levels, and say that in such a system students aren't labeled and are free to be themselves. They say that it gives them opportunities to learn from and help each other, opportunities they would not have in a conventional public school. They feel that they have the chance to learn what they want to learn.

If students are struggling with the challenging material, they can get clarification during the discussion sessions or they may be assigned alternative materials. They can also go deeper into a selected book with the approval of the mentor. The student body also offers positive peer pressure with the attitude that "it's okay to learn and be smart"—students build social status through their academic pursuits. Students also learn how to study so they can deal successfully with increasingly challenging material.

Planning for ILA began with a small group of parents getting together to discuss options to the conventional public school system. They asked for the assistance of the current director of the Blackfoot Charter School. The charter process came together quickly, and the school was initially publicized through word of mouth and radio spots. Meetings were held to inform prospective parents and their students about the program.

While the process occurred within a short time, the actual charter with the district did not come easily. ILA had to agree to several items before the charter was signed. The school is

actually chartered to serve seventh and eighth grades in addition to the high school levels it currently serves; however, the agreement restricts the school from including these middle grades for two years after opening. More dramatically, the leadership of the school states that it may not retain ADA funds for students residing within its district's boundaries; thus, in order to remain operational it must draw its students (and funding) from other districts.

During an afternoon focus group on the day of the author's visit, parents stated that they are extremely happy with ILA. Several explained that their children have been able to open up in the small learning environment, and that they feel the students are challenged and are learning. They see ILA as providing a new way for students to learn in a "physically and emotionally safe" environment. Parents also felt strongly that ILA was very different from conventional public schools since students had to do much more than learn how to "jump through hoops." A few parents commented that it was unfortunate that they could not select only those students who worked hard. They believe that the ILA is not for all students, and that conventional public school meets needs in other ways.

ILA's first year has not been without challenges. Students say that there is some animosity toward them from other students in the conventional public schools. There is definitely the perception that the charter students are "taking money away" from their schools. However, the administration believes that more Snake River School District students have been lost to other districts because of the open enrollment policies among them.

The distance-learning program is currently facing some scrutiny. ILA is currently attempting to determine if it is allowed to hire private tutors to work with students in a central location. What is at issue is "students congregating at a facility" regardless of whether or not the facilities are rented or leased (they are not). The outside perception is that, in doing so, ILA is essentially operating other schools outside its chartering district. The administration hopes that the issue can be resolved legally to clarify what is permissible. In the meantime, the school is currently applying for charters in seven districts from which it currently draws students through its distance-learning program. It believes that at least two of those districts will grant charters for the 2003–2004 school year. The administration would like to see a change in certification requirements and alternative charter authorization options, two issues that are affecting the school's ability to expand
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Liberty Charter School: Nampa Revisited

Liberty Charter School (formerly known as Nampa Charter School) looks dramatically different than it did during its first year (1999–2000). Operating out of portable buildings and leasing additional space from a church, the Nampa Charter School served 233 Kindergarteners through eighth-graders during its first year. Now, three years later, the school has expanded to include the ninth through 12th grades and serves approximately 400 students.

The new facility is located at the southern edge of Nampa. The building, whose construction was funded by a federal grant, sits on 19 acres. It included separate areas for high school students and their younger counterparts, as well as a large gymnasium. The high school section of the building has a commons area with lockers and tables for study. A professional kitchen allows for the preparation of food for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. An adjoining cafeteria has a friendly atmosphere where students eat by grade levels. Outside, students enjoy grassy areas and playground equipment. There are plans for a future running track.

Students are thrilled with their new school. High school students appreciate the chance to be in a small learning environment and they receive an education that is "the foundation that will last the rest of my life." Because of its small size, the high school students will have the same teachers (e.g., one for math) for their entire enrollment period at Liberty. One student said such an arrangement helps students become more comfortable because students and teachers can get to know each other. High school students are required to pass benchmarks in order to pass their courses; seat time is not considered to be a sufficient indicator of learning.

All the 15 or so students who were interviewed enjoyed the school so much that they would never consider going back to their previous schooling arrangements (primarily the conventional public school or home school). When asked what they didn't like about Liberty, not one had anything negative to say.

Despite its accomplishments, Liberty continues to face challenges as a charter school. Criticisms from outsiders include that the small environment is not preparing students for real life, but those involved with the school believe those claims are unfounded. "When in life do most people ever have to work in a conventional high school–like setting?" asks one teacher.

Others do not understand the school's philosophy and curriculum, which is based on Shurely grammar, Saxon math, and the Harbor method of character development[15]. However, the school opens its arms to visitors and invites naysayers to see for themselves what students are doing and can achieve. The approach has prepared students to do exceptionally well on state exams, which are carefully proctored to avoid accusations of cheating. The author observed first-graders reducing fractions and converting basic percentages during a "concept board" activity, where the teachers leads students though math problems using illustrations and counting aloud. .

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[15] For more information, refer to the *1999-2000 Idaho Charter School Program Evaluation Report* (NWREL, 2000).

Summary and Conclusions

The three guiding questions of this study as well as the charter school law itself will be used to focus on the progress of Idaho Charter Schools. Conclusions are based on data from this year's study as well as those from Years One through Three.

1. **Did the charter schools accomplish what they proposed, based on their mission and goals?**
2. **Did their students meet the achievement levels proposed in their charter school applications?**

Charter schools are accomplishing a great deal of what they set out to accomplish. Schools report that 87 percent of their goals are being met or exceeded. Charter schools that have existed for at least two years are also making progress on their goals, and have increased the number met or exceeded by 32 percent since last year. Nearly three-quarters of the schools' goals relate to student achievement, and the rest are organizational or programmatic goals.

Both staff and parents believe that their respective schools were slightly exceeding their missions. One hundred percent of parents stated that they supported their school mission, with more than three-quarters (77 percent) saying they "strongly supported" it. When asked to rate their satisfaction on a number of issues, "school mission" was rated most highly. Each school's belief in its particular mission is critical to maintaining a solid foundation for its existence.

The evidence and rigor used to support the extent to which goals are reached varies from school to school. Some of the data are rigorous and consistent with goals (e.g., "all scores were at or above the proficient level" supports a goal that related to such scores), while some are less so (e.g., "anecdotal evidence" does not rigorously support student performance). The Idaho Charter School Network is currently facilitating peer review site visits so that the schools can each further examine their own progress toward goals.

Teachers take student achievement seriously. They rated "high emphasis on academics" as the number two reason for working in a charter school. According to standardized test data, charter schools are addressing the first intent of the Idaho charter school law, which is "*improving student learning.*" Another intent of the law is that charter students will "*meet [or exceed] measurable student … standards.*" Two of seven applicable schools reported their 8th grade DMA math scores. While neither of these schools met state proficiency levels of 3.0 or above, both exceeded state averages. Six of eight applicable schools reported their 4th grade DMA scores. Four of these schools exceeded state averages, and three exceeded state proficiency levels. Four schools of eight schools serving Kindergarten through third grade reported their IRI results. In order to show a more accurate picture of results, scores were obtained from the Idaho State Department of Education. For all schools, state averages were exceeded in 67 percent (19 out of 28) of comparisons (by school and grade level). Seven schools reported their ISAT results for mathematics, reading, and language arts. Of those schools, state proficiency levels were exceeded in 89 percent (28 out of 32) of comparisons (by

school and grade level) in math, 89 percent (34 out of 38) of comparisons (by school and grade level) in reading, and 88 percent (35 out of 40) of comparisons (by school and grade level) in language arts. Charter schools also use a variety of other assessments, including portfolio assessments that allow one to view a student's work samples, and thereby the student's progress, over time. Because of the individualized nature of portfolio assessment, it is difficult to generalize those outcomes. See the section on performance assessments (Pages 13 through 16) and individual school profiles (Appendix A) for more detailed information.

3.   What makes charter schools in Idaho unique?

The third intent of the Idaho charter law is that the schools will "*include the use of different and innovative teaching methods*." Schools offer a number of educational programs, and these programs permeate each school as they reflect the schools' missions. Idaho is one of the few states that has amended its charter school law to include virtual learning as an option for delivery of instruction. Two of the new schools are virtual in nature, and one includes a distance education component. These schools are providing unique opportunities for many of Idaho's students, particularly those who have been home schooled. The virtual high school also provides ample opportunities for dual enrollment with the conventional public schools in the districts it serves.

The fourth intent of the Idaho charter law is to "*create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.*" Staff rated "educational program" as the main reason for working in a charter school. They agreed most strongly with the statement that they are "challenged to be effective." They also agreed that they are involved in decision-making and can influence the direction of the school. Staff members are very satisfied with the collegiality that they find at their respective schools. They also report that they have opportunities for staff development, the majority of which includes on-site training.

Several Idaho charter schools have unconventional grade level configurations. Examples of various configurations include serving students in K through 12, or 6 through 12, or K through 4. Six of the schools have multi-grade classrooms, including one of the high schools. Eight schools have expanded the number of grade levels they serve to accommodate students as they progress.

Many of the charters are operating independent of their sponsoring districts. Less than half the charters follow their respective district's calendars. Several of the charters also have an extended day, extended year, or year-round calendar. Most of the schools are creating their own policies, though a few adopt from their sponsoring districts.

To "*provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system*" is the fifth intent of the Idaho charter law. Charter enrollment has more than tripled since the first year of this study. The total number of

students now being served is 3,100, which is slightly less than 1 percent of total enrollment in Idaho's public schools. Charter schools are also bringing more students into the public system. According to their profiles, the charter schools that began operating this year have attracted 641 previously home-schooled students (or 21 percent of this year's total enrollment) into the public school system.

Charter schools, as a public education choice, continue to be limited for Idaho's students as a whole. This is hindering the second intent of the charter law, which is to *"increase learning opportunities for all students" through charters.* Thirteen charter schools are in operation, and these exist primarily in the more populated areas of the state, leaving many rural students and their families without such choices. There is continued demand for enrollment slots in some existing charter schools. Overall, schools report that waiting lists exceed available slots by 83 percent.

Charter schools are not always seen as competition, but are sometimes viewed as a way to enhance educational offerings and provide choice. One school district (Meridian) sponsored its technically focused charter high school, and plans to open a medical charter school next year. State law authorizes local school districts as the authorizing agency, which sometimes proves to be a lengthy and complex process for both the district and the charter school founders.

When parents do have educational choices, they tend to select programs that they feel are best suited for their children. Of all the aspects of the charter schools, parents are most satisfied with the educational program (which was also the number one reason for sending their child to the school in the first place). Parents also report being involved in the schools, and they are satisfied with the potential for their involvement.

The extent to which charter school practices are being transferred to their conventional public counterparts is not fully known. The chartering districts were interviewed two years ago, and none had made modifications to their course offerings based on what the charter schools were doing. Two schools changed their marketing plans as a result of having a charter school in their district. Further investigation of impact will occur in Year Five of this study. However, charter schools are affecting other charter schools. The Liberty Charter School has been a model for Hidden Springs Charter School as well as North Star Charter School, which is scheduled to open in fall 2003.

Additional conclusions

Funding:
While there is the argument that charter schools receive more state general dollars than if their students were in larger conventional public schools in their districts[16], it appears that most charters are spending somewhat less than their sponsoring districts. Lower spending may be due in part to larger class sizes (charter have an average of two more students per classroom), though they have smaller schools overall.

Student services:
While charter schools do not offer the extracurricular activities offered by their conventional public counterparts, all charter schools offer counseling and special education services in some capacity, either on-site or as part of the sponsoring district's program. All but one of the schools have a special education teacher on staff. Nine schools also offer after-school and lunch programs.

Seven schools offer transportation to their students, and for those schools, the average ridership is reflective of the state average. However, transportation continues to be a significant issue for charter schools. Offering bus service to students is very difficult in the first year of operation, since transportation funding is based on the previous year's ADA. This may be inhibiting *"increased learning opportunities for all students,"* since only those students who can walk or whose parents can drive them to school will be able to get there. Certainly, some charter schools work out feasible transportation contracts with their districts at the onset of operations. Barriers to such contracts include a weak relationship between the two parties or insufficient funding to contract for services in the first year. For parents who are able to drive their children to work, mileage does not appear to be prohibitive; 41 percent travel more than five miles each way (virtual schools notwithstanding).

Demographics:
In 69 percent of comparisons across six categories, charter school had demographics that reflected those of their respective districts. About half the schools differed from their districts in the number of Title I students and students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. Many charter schools do not ask for this information upon enrollment and are unaware of students' designations if parents do not communicate them when enrolling their children. Previously home-schooled students, in particular, may have never been tested for special needs. Also, many home schooling parents are extremely private and do not readily disclose family income information required for Title I and free/reduced-price lunch.

Overall, parents did not rate having a child with special needs as an important reason for sending their child to a charter school. However, when accounting for only those parents for whom "special needs" was applicable to their child, the importance of "meeting special needs" as a reason for sending the child to the charter school increased significantly. The lack

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[16] Smaller schools have a smaller divisor than larger ones, as per the state formula. Thus, they receive larger financial support.

of a definition of "special needs" makes results difficult to evaluate since parents could interpret it freely. However, when parents perceived that their child had a special need it became a strong motivating force to enroll the child in a charter school.

Facilities:

Facilities for charter schools continue to be a challenge. Seven of Idaho's 11 non-virtual schools are still in temporary facilities. Only two of the charter schools have facilities that were built specifically for them. Others are in older school buildings, leased office space, or portable buildings. However, the schools have done a remarkable job of making their schools work in spite of sometimes small and less-than-ideal spaces.

Technical assistance:

 School staff have requested assistance in their governance and leadership, as well as in community relations.

Public awareness of the public nature of charter schools:

The public nature of charter schools is understood only to varying degrees among charter school stakeholders. There is at times a perception that the schools can be selective rather than being open to any student interested in and able to attend the school.

Changes over time:

As the charter schools settle into their own identities, they have made minor changes. Several schools applied for amendments to their original charters, the majority for grade level changes. Only one waiver has been filed; it was for a teacher to teach outside an endorsement area. Two schools have modified their goals to reflect Idaho learning standards. Administrators have changed at a few schools.

Both staff and parents have described a phenomenon of "first-year growing pains," which describes coming to terms with the reality of day-to-day operations and how that reality differs to some extent from the ideals set forth in the original charter. One issue that is voiced occasionally is that "the school is becoming more public" as time goes on. A few teachers, parents, and students believe that their charter school is best suited for only hard working, well-behaved students; they are often surprised when the school lets "anyone" in. It may be possible that the schools are not clearly communicating to stakeholders the meaning of "public" in the sense that the school is open to anyone who is within attendance boundaries. Certainly, most charters have a particular emphasis that may not be appropriate for all students; this is acceptable as long as the school is not exclusionary. Denying access to special education students or requiring parent participation during school hours are examples of exclusionary requirements.

Student voices:

Students are generally very content in their schools. They strongly agree that teachers and administrators know them by name, and that there are rules that must be followed. To most students, having friends at the school seems less important than the learning experience. When reading through students' comments, one gets the sense that "it's okay to learn" at the charter school; many are challenged in their classrooms and are also relieved to escape the social pressures at larger conventional public schools. Perhaps most important, the majority of students report feeling safe at the school.

Despite some of the challenges and concerns that some may have regarding charter schools, the schools are serving students and their families in search of a choice in the public system.